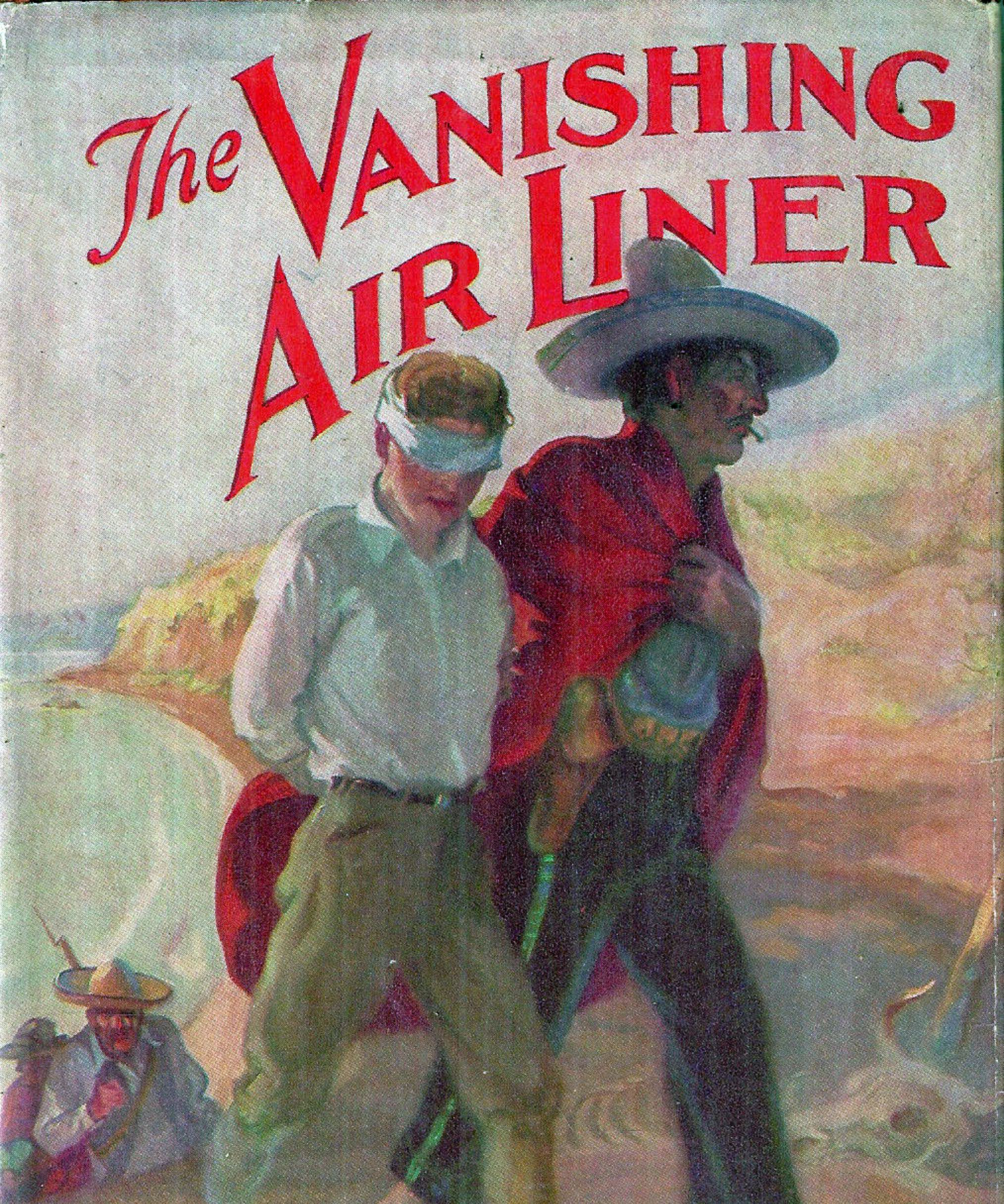
The Vanishing Air Liner



VAN POWELL

The VANISHING AIR LINER

POWELL

A. L. BURT COMPANY

THE VANISHING AIR LINER

VAN POWELL

LASSIE

To Warren
from Aunt Evelyn & Sophie
1933

Counting his steps, Tim was led along into bondage.
(Page 195) *(The Vanishing Air Liner)*

The Vanishing Air Liner

By VAN POWELL

Author of
"The Sky Scouts Series"
"The Mystery Boys Series"

A. L. BURT COMPANY
PUBLISHERS
New York Chicago

THE SKY SCOUTS SERIES

By VAN POWELL

Here's a great, new aviation series for the air-minded boys of America, packed full with adventure, mystery and thrills.

THE MYSTERY CRASH
THE HAUNTED HANGAR
THE VANISHING AIR LINER
THE GHOST OF MYSTERY AIRPORT

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THE VANISHING AIR LINER

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THE VANISHING AIR LINER

CHAPTER I

A "MAGNETIC" MYSTERY

"SEVEN points off the course!"

Rodney Ellis repeated his chum's information unbelievingly.

In spite of the skill with which the new airplane's designer, Rod's father, had soundproofed the cabin, Rodney raised his voice almost to a shout.

"Pat, we can't be seven points off the course! Look at the compass!"

"I said 'nearly' seven points," Pat Kelly, nicknamed "Fat" Pat to contrast with his twin, "Slim" Tim, who stood just behind him, wanted to be exact.

"Don't pay any attention to him," Tim, who claimed all the Kelly brains, always belittled his stout twin's claims, "Pat's brains are in the bulge under his belt buckle, Rod!"

But the son of the airplane builder whose newest ship was being ferried down the California coast, turned to Pat.

"Off the course. Pat, how do you know?"

"He doesn't!"

"I do!"

Seventeen-year-old Rodney, two years the senior of the quarrelsome pair, stopped them with a gesture. He turned to the one who always insisted that his body ran to skeleton, but that he had the brain under his red-thatched head while his brother ran to "beef" and had what he called his thinking apparatus located under his belt.

"You won't get anywhere, arguing," Rod asserted. "Tim, you know how important it is for us not to be off the course."

"Of 'course' I do. This ship has been held back for two days over the time agreed on for delivery. That's why we're 'ferrying' it to Oakland airport on a rainy day."

"It isn't only because we are delayed," Rod said moodily. "Ever since father's big 'job' that he built for the Overland Airways company crashed down with its wings stripped off, and nobody to say it was the pilot's fault, everybody has whispered around that my father made an error in the design or there was a flaw in construction——"

"I understand all that," Tim was sympathetic. "Naturally he wants this ship to be perfect."

Rodney nodded emphatically.

Ever since the time when the earlier model turned out by the Ellis Aircraft plant had cracked up, public opinion and aviation confidence had turned against the man who had come back from war flying to start aircraft manufacturing. In a few weeks the slowly-built reputation of years had been undermined.

Nation-wide business depression had contributed to the loss of orders and the aircraft designer had come almost to the point of surrendering, of losing his business.

However, one acquaintance, standing high in aviation circles, and influential in the formation of a new air transport company, had induced its directors to place one order for a big air liner with the nearly bankrupt builder.

The Oakland Queen, carefully planned, assembled, checked and tested, stood between the aircraft plant and ruin. Her perfect performance might restore public confidence, establish credit, enable the firm to "carry on." Any failure in design, airworthiness or performance, would mark the end of hope for Rodney's father and for the son he had trained to have a share in the design of future aircraft when Rod at-

tained the years of experience and understanding.

"I can see why you'd be worried by Pat's crazy talk," Tim said, "but don't be! He doesn't know anything about navigation——"

"Av-igation!" corrected Pat sharply.

"Nav-igation!" snapped Tim, " 'Avigation!' " he scoffed.

"It's 'n' in the navy and 'a' in the air!" chanted Pat. Rodney, foreseeing another futile debate, checked it at once.

"Flying over clouds can be called navigation or avigation," he told Tim. "Let's find out what Pat meant by saying the Oakland Queen is six or seven points off the course. If we don't, we'll be in Hawaii, instead of making San Francisco."

"All right. Let the baby elephant tell us."

Pat, a little nettled as he always was by his brother's sarcasm, ignored the intent, hopeful look in Rodney's eyes and pursed up his lips and took a teasing attitude.

"Use your brains!" he urged Tim. "What did I do? You must have seen every move I've made. If you can't put two and two together ——"

"All I've seen you do—oh! I suppose you mean that you've been hiding something in your coat pocket and looking at it every once in awhile. You went up to the pilots' compartment

three times, but you did not say anything to the Chief, or to Joe. Pat's just trying to be mysterious," Tim told Rodney, "and he hasn't anything to back it up!"

"Oh, haven't I?"

"Don't waste time," Rod urged. "Tell us."

"I'll say this much——"

Pat winked at Rodney.

"It's a 'magnetic' mystery."

Tim laughed scornfully. "Pat is trying to be smart," he sneered.

"I am not. I'll show you."

From his pocket Pat drew a small, flat, round brass case: under a glass on its face a blued steel needle quivered to and fro across a white dial, shivered to a stop, and pointed to a figure of many around the edge of the dial.

"That!" Tim put all his scorn into one exclamation. "That's only his Scout compass. Rod, he thinks that's more accurate than the one on this ship, the best your father could get, and tested to a fare-ye-well!"

"This little compass is good!" insisted Pat. "I checked it with the 'aperiodic' compass at the plant and you know that's the most scientifically accurate kind there is. This one is just a half point off true North — and it shows that the ship's compass is six points and more out of true."

"It doesn't!"

"Does!"

Rodney took the small compass, put it near the metal of chair braces and other objects. Its position varied slightly under their influence but it always came back to its original place, and a check with the big instrument in the pilots' compartment, forward of the passenger cabin, showed the larger one to be a number of points different.

"You'd better not tell Joe, or the Chief Pilot, they're off the course, and especially not Joe," warned Tim. "He'd jump all over you." He nodded toward the somewhat sullen-visaged assistant pilot who held the wheel-control at his side of the compartment. "Nelse wouldn't thank you, either."

Rod went to the door of the pilots' room. The simple, accurate compass installed on the instrument panel held a steady position; its needle on the floating card within the case showed six points and more away from the position Pat's smaller instrument indicated. That big compass and the ship had been carefully "swung" and tested, to the East, and after that to the other cardinal points. By that method, a check made with the airplane on a turntable far from any large metal hangar or other deflecting influence,

the air liner's navigating instrument had been perfected.

Except for the allowance made on all compasses by navigators of water vessels and pilots of airplanes, due to the fact that the True North of the earth's axis is not the Magnetic North to which a compass needle is drawn, that compass should have shown absolute accuracy.

If it did, then Pat's compass was "off."

Yet, as he stood there, Rod felt with a queer sense of foreboding, that Pat's compass was—right!

He glanced at Joe, sullen, moody. The assistant pilot, as Rod knew well, disliked the designer's son, envied and feared him. More than that, Joe might well be waiting for a chance to revenge himself on Rod and his father for his discharge from the test pilot's berth. Joe had brought it on himself; but he felt otherwise; and Rod hesitated before calling attention to the difference between the two quivering needles.

Then, as they came over a break in clouds, he glanced down.

"We've got to say something," he whispered to Tim as the twins came up beside him. "Look! We're over—the Pacific!"

"What's the big idea?" growled Joe. Nelse, the Chief Pilot, glancing up from a bit of paper

on which he made some correction, looked surprised at the invasion of his quarters.

Rodney laid the small compass on top of the round, flat glass of the bigger compass.

"We're off our course," he stated. "Something may be wrong with our compass. It's——"

He stopped, wordless. Joe, comparing the two needles, glowered.

When Rod had put the small case down, the two needles had disagreed.

"You must be dreaming!" growled Joe. "What's wrong?"

Rod had no answer. The compasses had shown disagreement. Now——

The needles agreed—precisely!

CHAPTER II

MUTINY IN THE AIR

With an exultant shout Tim pointed out to Joe and Nelse, his Chief, how Pat had been "shown up."

"As soon as your compass saw its big brother, it got ashamed and saw the 'error' of its ways," he laughed. "Shows what comes of wearing your thinking machinery in your bread-basket."

"Must have been a trick of the light, or of the angle you looked at the compass from," Nelse put his papers in his log-pocket beside him in the compartment wall.

"No!" exclaimed Rodney, "I looked down when we passed that last break of the storm clouds, and we are——"

"Look here!" Joe turned angry eyes, scowling at Rodney, "trying to make me out to be a poor flyer, are you? Same old trick you used before, to get your father to——"

"I didn't!" Rod defended, switched from his former intent.

"My compass is right!" declared Pat. "You've done something to that compass——"

"Here!" Joe was furious, "you think so much of your compass and of this young know-it-all! Nelse, let Rodney Ellis take a trick at the controls. See how good he is. It's safe enough—he can keep the ship up, I mean. He's been shown that much. But let's see if he can fly it!"

Nelse hesitated an instant. He seemed puzzled about something .

"Let's see if Rod's high rating on his junior pilot's license came through 'influence,' the way I claim it did!" went on Joe.

"He got it by flying across the continent in almost record time!" Tim defended his older chum. "He'd have won, broken the record, but he ran out of gas on the very last few miles of the flight and then he had to make a dead-stick glide. He doesn't have to pretend that a compass is out of whack to make you look small! ——"

Joe scowled.

"All right," he said, sliding out of the right hand seat as Nelse took charge. "Nelse, let this nearly-broke-a-record pilot see how it feels to handle his pop's newest ship. He says we're off the course. Let's see how he'd prove it and how he'd get back again."

Nelse did not at all dislike Rodney.

When the contract for the air liner had been assigned to the Ellis Aircraft Corporation,

Nelse, as its chief of navigation and air personnel, had gone to the assembling plant to study the blue prints, watch the building, testing, rigging, checking, stabilizing and other work as it was completed.

He knew that Joe had been a test pilot before he went there, and that Joe had become resentful when Rod took up junior flying, being afraid the son of the designer of aircraft would usurp his own test-pilot's place.

Rodney had higher ambitions, as Nelse understood very well; he was of a higher mental type than Joe who, for all his expertness as a radio operator and skill as a pilot, had an envious, resentful streak.

That had so interfered with his work that he had been discharged; but Nelse, perhaps feeling sorry for him, had secured him as his own assistant.

Nevertheless, although he had taken Joe under his wing, Nelse saw that the seventeen-year-old junior had better stuff in him than the twenty-four-year-old regular; and Nelse, with a covert smile, decided to let Rodney exhibit his ability.

At least, that was how he put it.

Tim, for all his alertness of eye, was not quite sure whether he caught a wink passing between Joe and Nelse or not.

Rod, slipping into Joe's vacated chair, reported in respectful fashion.

"Course due South, sir," he stated. "Altitude five thousand. Wind velocity reported to be fourteen miles, on the tail. With three engines revving up just under full speed, probable ground speed a hundred and twenty-four miles." Nelse, glancing at the instrument panel, verified Rod's report of gas and oil pressure and feed, tachometers, altimeter, wind-speed indicator and other important considerations.

"I'll talk after awhile, when you've had time to see how it feels to fly an air liner," he suggested, returning to the completion of his reports.

Rodney, watching the swirls of heavy cloud beneath, concentrated on his control job.

Pat, as far away from the assistant pilot as he could get, sat at the back of the cabin, and Tim, after watching Rodney for a moment, joined his brother for an argument about the use of "avigation."

"Look-you!" he insisted, "Pat—look-you——"

"I am!" said his twin, but his gaze was concentrated on his small compass.

"It's 'off' again!" he confided.

Tim was on the point of assailing his brother for a witless, stubborn disgrace; but he withheld his impulse.

Rod was beckoning to them.

"I know what it is," Pat hastened forward.

"Yes." Rodney turned to Nelse. "Nelse, that compass is wrong!"

"Nonsense!" Nelse was disgusted. "Are you going to bring that all up again? You'll have to show better proof than a Scout compass!"

"All right," Rodney said, stubbornly.

He indicated a band of shadow, thrown from the cabin, across a wing and overlapping the edge.

"That shadow was exactly on the leading edge of the right wing when I took over," he declared. "You know, Nelse, as well as I do, that the sun is getting higher, but that would *shorten* the shadow, not shift it to *overlap* the leading edge. Only turning our nose out toward the West would do that!"

"All right," said Nelse, "let Joe come back and switch in the radio. We can pick up a radio beacon and make sure."

"There's a loose wire," Joe, speaking through the doorway, informed his superior. "It's some of that careless work they do at the Ellis place!"

Nelse turned in surprise.

"I'll solder it as soon as we get in," said Joe.

"That's no matter," said Pat, coming up, with Tim backing him closely. "My compass shows Rod is right."

"Your compass!" Joe was sarcastic.

"Hold fast, all," urged Rodney. "I'm going down through that next break in the storm clouds—we'll soon see!"

They took chairs, getting themselves settled as he dipped the nose into a space between two banks of mist and with power cut went at a rapid glide toward the lower region, watching the altimeter closely as its pointer dropped back —three—two thousand, five hundred—two—one——

They came out of the heavy vapor, into poor visibility, but could discover nothing recognizable.

"Good reason why!" Nelse showed intense surprise. "We're over the Pacific Ocean!"

"I know we are!" Rodney leveled off, picked up safer margin of power and then dipped a wing moderately and kicked rudder enough to bank on an inswinging curve.

"Here!" cried Nelse, "what are you doing that for "

"Turning!"

"But a quarter circle would have been enough. You've made a full hundred and seventy degrees —almost a half turn. You're all but going straight back!"

"I'm cutting in toward the shore, though."

"Don't you know a dozen rich men are hang-

ing around Oakland airport waiting to start the initial flight this afternoon?" Nelse was annoyed. He caught his wheel, but hesitated as he saw Rod's jaw set.

"The 'billion dollar passengers,' as the papers call them because they are so rich, will have to wait!" Rod said, determination in his tone as he began to climb the ship, cutting in the throttles for more power to get again into the upper fair weather. "All the future of my father's business depends on delivering a perfect ship."

"There's nothing wrong with that compass," snapped Joe, moving up behind Rodney. "It was wind-drift—the Weather Bureau reported a tail wind but I reckon it was off-shore."

"I'll make sure!"

"See here, my boy!" Nelse spoke crisply, impatiently. "I am Chief Pilot on this 'bus! You know what mutiny is, don't you?"

"He's as much in charge as you are!" cried Tim, from the cabin. "Up to the time they sign the delivery papers and assign this crate, Rod's father owns her and Rod is—he's——"

"Supercargo!" suggested Pat.

"We'll see!" roared Joe, catching Rod by the shoulders.

So unexpected was his move that, as he dragged Rodney backward out of his chair, the

wheel, controlling the "stick" column, and through that the elevators and ailerons, came backward to the collar!

Up went the ship's nose. The engines were unequal to the task.

As they all fell back, pinned to their seats by the pull of gravity, the stall came, the nose fell sharply down, power was on!

In a power-dive the big airplane tore through the mist—seaward!

CHAPTER III

AFTER THE POWER-DIVE

When danger, leaping like a panther out of nowhere to grip the throat, comes before some people, it paralyzes them.

Rod saw that Nelse was of that type.

Himself of the more highly-strung class which nevertheless steels itself to avert catastrophe, Rod was amazed.

He knew that pilots, especially those selected for air transport places, were chosen not only for skill and experience, but, as well, for character and poise, for ability to act in an emergency.

Joe, seeing what he had done, released Rodney.

Nelse, they all saw in that split-second, was incapable of action. Joe knew that he could not act.

If Rod did not save them, they were lost.

In no aerial calamity is there more danger than in a power-dive.

With the stall, and consequent inability of control surfaces to act on the air streams, the

nose had dropped; with the engines still on, full, for the climb, the ordinarily slow beginning of the dive was instantly made a swift, terrific descent.

"Rod!"—gasped Tim—and was silent. His lips grew white.

Pat, braced as well as possible, never realized that in the excitement his compass had gone through the air, even as Joe, caught off balance, had slid back down the inverted cabin aisle.

The ocean lay below them.

The altimeter, on the climb, showed as the dive began, a scant two thousand feet.

At their speed, it meant no time at all before the surging, eager waters would close around them.

Rod knew well what confronted him!

To the drag of gravity was added the full power of the engines.

A nose-dive, without help, would be swift enough to be horribly dangerous: with engines almost full on, it was almost deadly.

Rodney saw mental pictures, like swift flicks of fire!

He saw a smashed, scattered clutter of debris that had been his own and his father's pride and hope—The Oakland Queen—with something still and crushed lying here and there within it.

He saw, in that flash of eternity that was a

split thousandth of a mortal second of time, a broken, ruined father, bereft of hope, of reputation, of business, of friends!

The world would say, "Oh, yes—just the way it happened with the other 'bus he built! Weakness in design, fault in construction. A dive—wings ripping off—oh, too bad, but that's the end of him!"

Lives, property—all were in the hollow of Rod's hand!

"We can't crash!" he whispered, and with one hand dragging him up by his clutch at the wheel, he did the one thing that he could do.

With all his force he kicked a foot against the key in the ignition switch slot.

To handle three engine throttles was beyond the limit of time at his disposal. It might be seconds!

They had gone up in the climb he had made; but speed in a power-dive was quickly attained!

He took the one way to cut out the engines.

In an instant more Rod was back in the seat. He threw the wheel to a position where its column, controlling the "flippers" or elevators, was in neutral.

As far as he could he had removed all the factors but that of the excessive speed already attained.

"He wants to make it a plain nose-dive!"

flashed through Tim's active brain. "If he doesn't tear off the wings we may come out of it, at that!"

Already the monoplane was going down with almost the speed of a diving hawk.

To pull back on the stick, elevate the "flippers" and drag the nose upward was the logical course; but—would the wings stand the strain of a change of their angle of entry into the air? It must be so abrupt! All the force of the air passing them would be exerted upon the almost flat under surfaces! The thrust would be terrific!

In Rodney's mind, for the tiniest fraction of time, was a vision of that former dive made by the ship which had been found with stripped, twisted wings.

Was this one more strongly built? Was the wing design better adapted to sudden stresses?

Only a test would tell—and instants counted!

Under them surged the hungry Pacific.

The lives of chums, of the crew, and the safety of the new, white-winged air liner, rested on that test!

The wings must hold!

With steady hand Rodney began to draw back the wheel, so that its column, controlling the elevators, lifted their surfaces to catch the air at a greater angle.

The whole fabric of the ship groaned like a living creature having its arms torn at by fierce, brutish powers.

Casting his whole faith on his father's care and craftsmanship Rodney eased the stick for an instant of time, then drew it back again—then bent swiftly forward and twisted the key in the ignition switch!

Tim gave a startled cry.

"Are you crazy!"

Rodney had in a bare flick of time seen that to come out of the dive would not be enough.

There would still be water under them: the end of the dive would leave them to find themselves descending—always going down—in the glide essential to maintain flying speed.

He must get power, Rod knew.

To do that, he hoped that he would find at least one engine on a firing stroke.

If one engine could be started, perhaps the force of the wind against its propeller might help to carry it on to the next firing point.

One engine would at least prolong the glide—might get them to the shore where they could set down, somehow, and avoid a watery finish to the catastrophe.

He moved with the swiftness of their dire need.

The key was still in the ignition slot, bent by his kick. He threw it. The key turned.

His eyes clung to the ammeters.

If either of them showed a change in its needle—it would mean a firing engine.

An ammeter moved. Then a second moved its needle as he watched.

Two engines had caught. They picked up, and Rod drew back still more on the wheel-column.

The wings had stood the strain.

"But will the trucks dip into the sea and throw us nose-over?" he breathed.

Forward, gaining velocity, but flattening its glide, the ship raced; the sheet of turbulent, crinkling water raced to meet it.

Uprushing water—full gun!—wheel dragged back till it bore upon his chest; Rod waited that eternity that was no time at all.

Pat closed his eyes.

Tim's breath was suspended—then it flew out of his lungs in a great exhalation at the instant that Rod yelled "Ah-h-h!—safe!"—and climbed the ship with the danger of nosing over and plunging well past in the flick of an eyelash.

Almost immediately he leveled by depressing the nose again.

There must be no further risk of reaching a stall. Those cylinders must be cleared of surplus gas, prevented from choking on the rich

mixture they could take care of at a time when they had been better warmed up.

With spasmodic spurts Rod cleaned out the cylinders.

Then he swung still further inland, just beneath the low hanging clouds.

"May I be relieved, sir?"

Rod said it without sarcasm, and with entirely dutiful respect to the man whose tense, inactive hands had left his own wheel, whose white, set face still looked back into a past menace from which Rod's own quickness had snatched him.

Rod, all of a sudden, felt shaky in a reaction that made him anxious to release his trick at the controls.

Joe came forward, sullen but quick, at Nelse's brief, shaky gesture.

Waiting almost automatically, steadying the ship and climbing at a safe angle, Rodney began to grasp the sense of thoughts that were racing through his over-stimulated brain.

Was Nelse "sky-shy?" Was he a victim of that terrible fear that sometimes overcomes a pilot when he has gone through some horrible air experience?

But when had the skilful, steady-going Nelse ever been in such a situation? And why had the trait of terror been concealed by him? It en-

dangered the lives of every soul he took up! It might come out any time! Sorry for Nelse though he was, Rod felt that he must talk to him, urge him to resign. But that could wait. Nelse, simply nodding in answer to Rod's respectful request, steadied the ship and then spoke, in a surprisingly cool voice.

"That was an awful whack you hit me, with the wheel!"

Rod stared. Suddenly he realized a possibility that explained the Chief Pilot's seeming paralysis.

The dual controls, unless thrown out by a device built for the rare need to break their full usefulness, had worked together. Both wheels had come back simultaneously. Rod had not been in his seat. Joe had dragged him out of it. That permitted his wheel, dragged back to its collar, to snatch the other against Nelse. Unbraced, he had caught the full impact. Doubtless, Rod admitted, such a blow would have knocked most of the wind out of his chest.

"I wondered," said Rodney. "I thought it was sky-shyness!"

Nelse laughed. "You just let somebody slam a wheel against you when you're not—for the sake of Moses, Henry! Where were you?"

Rod swung, at the compartment door. The

mechanician, a shortish, stocky individual, whom they had forgotten, stood in the after cabin.

"In the name of Ned!" Henry was white and shaky. "What were you trying to do?"

Nelse briefly explained.

"Where were you?" he demanded. Henry told him. He had been in the "coop," forward of the fuel tanks located in front of the fire-wall just ahead of the pilots' room. "Was making adjustments in the fuel feed," he stated. Rod nodded, knowing that his father had built the small cubby in which all the adjustable mechanical parts regulating fuel, oil flow, generators and other essentials, were located. There, behind the center engine, Henry could regulate the adjustments without causing passengers to be uneasy because he was working on the engines.

"When you want to 'circus' the ship again—wait till I get set!" the mechanician growled. "Nearly went overside! You ought to know, Joe——"

"Don't bother me!" Joe was snappish. "I'm hunting a landing spot."

Low in the foggy murk, working inland, he finally discovered one of the isolated emergency landing fields kept by the airways bureau.

Joe managed the landing without serious jar, and without delay turned over command to Nelse, who seemed quite his usual self again.

"I'm off to find a garage or some place where I can get some solder for that loose wire on the radio," he stated and hurried across the field of a small fruit ranch.

"You three get up on the wings," ordered Nelse. "Test the bracing and joining places, and look things over."

Nelse, as they obeyed, strolled off, arm-in-arm with the mechanical expert. Henry seemed to be getting Nelse's version of the recent affair.

Under Nelse's eye, with Rod working on the leading edge, Tim on the trailing edge of a wing, Pat at the body-joints of braces, there was no way for the chums to compare notes or to exchange ideas.

Tim, however, caught Rod's idea as the latter worked up close to a wingtip; there he could meet Tim: he worked quickly to that point.

"Rod," whispered Tim, "I think you ought to slip away and try to find a telephone and call your father. He'd be waiting for news of our arrival. He ought to know about the compass, and the rest!"

"I agree with you."

When Nelse and Henry went into the cabin for a moment, Rod dropped to the ground, from wingtip, and ran, bent low, toward the tail and off the field, veering away from the direction taken by Joe.

Watching Rod, the twins were stupefied to hear a fierce shout in the cabin.

"Give me that!"

From the cabin leaped Nelse, a small piece of paper in his hand. After him came Henry.

Pat looked up at Tim for instructions. But before Tim could tell his slower brother to intervene, Nelse ran fleetly off the field toward a dirt road at a little distance.

Tim dropped to the ground, meaning to run after Nelse, to join the chase, with Henry.

Pat caught his arm.

Nelse, with long legs, began to forge ahead of the more ponderous Henry. Pat held his brother's arm.

"Wait!" he urged. "That may be a trick to get us away from the ship so they can leave us. They may be trying to get us into a trap!"

The chase went behind some trees.

"I'm going to see where they went, anyway," exclaimed Tim.

Pat clung to his arm.

"No—don't!" he begged. "Stay here and help me find my Scout compass. It flew out of my hand in the cabin when I had to grab the chair braces. It helped us discover one mystery. It may be useful again!"

In that, for all his slow imagination, Pat proved himself to be a prophet.

CHAPTER IV

A STARTLING DISCOVERY

QUICKLY Tim climbed into the cabin. There he looked swiftly in every available corner for the small, round brass case of the compass while his somewhat slower twin came in.

"It isn't here!" Tim declared. "Or else it is wedged under some part of a chair."

"Or—somebody has it!" said Pat, slowly.

"Do you suppose that's what Nelse ran with? No—it looked like a paper he had in his fist."

"Tim—look in the pilots' compartment for my compass."

"If it flew out of your hand when the nose tilted up, it would have rolled back to the rear, silly!"

Pat ignored the gibe.

"I'll look there. But it could have rolled forward again when we dived!"

He went aft. Tim walked to the door that led into the forward compartment.

Casting his eyes from one available spot to another, he shook his head. The small compass was not to be seen.

"Pat—" Tim called suddenly, "Pat—come here!"

"Have you discovered it?"

"No. But—think a minute. How could a compass be deflected? Only by metal—maybe by a magnet. Now—think! Before the trouble Nelse or Joe could have slipped a magnet in some place where it would divert the needle."

Both forgot to seek the compass in the thrill of a possible discovery of much greater importance.

"If we found a magnet—it would be—evidence!" Tim argued.

"Let's think this out," he remarked as Pat stood behind him.

The compass, he reasoned, pointed its needle toward the magnetic North. To deflect it, some magnet or metallic object must be introduced into its "field" to make the arrow-tip turn toward it.

"We turned off from a due-South course toward the sea," Tim reflected aloud to his brother. "The shaft of the arrow was on a line with that case mark they call the 'lubber line.' So, if we turned to the West of South, flying down the coast, the point had to turn to the East of South——"

"That would be the left," Pat agreed—and

clutched his brother's arm. "That's Nelse's side of the ship!"

"So it is! Now, where could be hide anything? I thought of Joe because he had a spiteful reason to make trouble; but now that Nelse has disappeared, maybe he is at the bottom of this!"

"There's a pocket with a flap, where he keeps his log and report forms and licenses, at the side," Pat pointed out.

Tim moved into the Chief's seat, and opened the pocket, built in like those in automobile doors. He rummaged around. Pat saw by his face that the exploring hand had made no revealing contact.

"I guess he took whatever he used!" Pat surmised.

"Unless the back of this is metal!" Tim drew out a flat, oblong pad, but its back was of cardboard, not metal. He was about to put it back. On the face of the small paper form it held were some indentations made by the use of a hard lead pencil in writing on the top sheet which had then been torn off. Tim glanced at the indefinable marks.

"Hum-m-m!" he mumbled, "I guess this isn't anything."

For once Pat displayed a flash of inspiration.

"That's the pad Joe used to put down radio

test messages on," he explained. "It had a carbon sheet in it, he made a copy of everything. He turned in the originals to our office files at the plant and kept the copies, to double-check. They tried it out to see if that system could be used when the ship was put in the air and real messages came through."

"The carbon has been torn out." Tim indicated a rough edge of the lampblack-and-tallow-covered copying slip, caught under the top sheet. The carbon paper, so set in that it could be removed from one pair of forms to the next, had been ripped away but one corner remained.

Curiously Tim turned up the upper sheet, ran his finger under the bit of carbon sheet, and stared!

"Tim! What is it?"

"Look-you—Pat—Pat——"

Pat bent close over the edge of the sheet beneath the lifted black paper.

"Ellis—" he read.

"This may not be important," Tim said. "But it could be. I'm going to keep this top slip. It has lead pencil dents on it. If we knew of some way to make them come out!——"

"Graphite!" said Pat.

"You mean rub the stuff they lubricate some bearings with over the paper?"

"Yes—and then wipe off most of it. Some might settle in the dents."

They found some in the "coop"—a little on a carbureter pushrod.

They applied it, wiped off a small excess—and read a smudgy, half obliterated scrawl.

But it's contents stunned them.

It indicated that Rod's father was involved in something—but what?

That something appeared to be very wicked!

CHAPTER V

"CLOUD SCOUTS TO THE RESCUE!"

CAREFULLY, by the edges, Tim handed the smudged paper to his brother.

"It's awfully jumbled up, and its seems to be in code," he declared excitedly. "See what you can make of it, Pat!"

"One thing is plain enough. The carbon paper made the name of 'Ellis' stand out."

"Yes, Pat. How about the rest? Where the pencil didn't bear down very hard, it isn't clear. But I don't want to believe it the way I read it. Maybe you'll get a different meaning—even if you aren't very quick," he added, unable to break his old habit of feeling superior.

Pat studied the paper.

Truly its marks, rather blurry and blackened, made a jumble.

After a period of careful scrutiny, Pat spoke:

"This is how I read it, Tim."

Slowly he phrased the curious mixture of sense and nonsense.

" 'Ellis is the one. You were right, Hawk. He will follow a-one loop no t n. You had right

theory. He plans to get that billon dollar crowd out of the way then force down the stork and let the bears clean them up. Better repeat your plan, Hawk. Come in on eleven, dead stick stall on blue. Rock it. We will divide. The third party takes his East, you go South, I go into the lion's mouth!' "

Tim looked dismayed.

"Gosh—and golly!" he exclaimed, "that's how I read it, too, Pat!"

"But it comes right out and accuses Mr. Ellis of wanting to let animals destroy some people! Who is the 'billion dollar crowd'?"

Tim explained.

Some newspaper reporter had coined the expression, because ten or more of the wealthiest men on the West Coast were to be the passengers on the initial flight of the Oakland Queen.

"I guess their combined assets and credit would be a total of a billion dollars," Tim finished. He added, "That's what ties the message to Rod's father and not some other Ellis."

"How?"

"Think! Mr. Ellis is desperately pressed for credit to keep his plant going. All his hopes are fixed on the new air liner. Now you know, Pat, that she didn't entirely suit him in the tests. That's why he held her back two days

late for delivery and only sent the big ship off when the new transport company wired that if he didn't deliver they would cancel the contract."

"Yes, I know about that. But what does it have to do with this?"

He tapped the paper.

Tim's quick imagination, already building a theory, made him scoff.

"I should think you'd see it, Pat. 'Ellis plans to force down the stork,'" he quoted. "That means the Oakland Queen, because it fits in with letting wild animals get the 'billion dollar crowd.'"

"But why would he want to do such a terrible thing?"

According to Tim's theory, it must be that they were the ones who would not extend his credit: or else, by forcing down the ship and eliminating any possibility of being accused, by use of the 'bears,' he could turn a faulty ship into a source of revenue.

"There's insurance, for one thing," he explained. "Then there is ransom of the rich men—he could collect on some threat to let them be destroyed!"

"I won't believe it about Rod's father!" Pat defended, stoutly. "He wouldn't think of such a thing!"

"You wouldn't touch a loaf of bread that didn't belong to you till you found yourself without a cent, and starving!" he said meaningly.

Pat looked horrified.

"Do you think it's as terrible for Rod's father as that? Do you mean to say that his business is so close to ruin that you believe he'd take such desperate ways?"

"He might be forced into it by somebody else —maybe some of his creditors."

It seemed fantastic to Pat's straight-forward, honest mind.

"Who's 'Hawk'?"

Tim told him.

"The war ace who sells some little inventions to Mr. Ellis—his name is Hawkins, and he's a close friend. Maybe he's the ringleader."

Pat thought it over with growing distress. Truly there seemed to be no other way to interpret those clearly accusing phrases. Pat recalled the deflected compass, Henry's pursuit of Nelse who had gone "sky-shy" in a crisis, Joe's strange manner toward Rodney.

Were they all in some diabolical plot, he wondered?

"I won't believe it!"

"Suit yourself," Tim retorted. "Now, Pat, listen to me! I am sure we have stumbled on

something terrible. I think they all plan to wreck the ship, at sea. The compass was fixed to enable them to steer out over the Pacific, and yet it would swing back to natural and leave no evidence. This message says 'dead stick stall on blue' and that means Henry is mixed up in it, too, because he would be able to kill the three engines and make the ship glide down without power. 'Rock it' fits in, after 'stall on blue'—on the blue Pacific and rock the ship—to terrify the passengers and make them agree to pay heavy ransom!"

His theory almost carried him away.

"More than that," he argued, "the air rules of the Commerce Commission Aviation Bureau read that if an airplane is disabled or is wrecked at sea, the same laws apply as when a naval ship is in distress. That means, Pat, that salvage can be collected for its recovery. That accounts for 'we will divide.'"

"I see! Maybe you're right—but I hate to think so!"

"I don't like the idea any better than you do. Pat!" Tim caught his brother's arm, "remember, when first Rodney took an interest in us and let us have regular jobs in the lacquer and dope rooms, and then in other departments, he told us about meaning, some day, to organize a new idea that would put the ethics and the

loyalty and the ideals of the Boy Scout movement into aviation for young folks?"

"I certainly do," Pat agreed. "We liked the idea and named ourselves the Sky Scouts!"

"Well, Pat—here's the first place where the Sky Scouts can do something!"

"But we can't tell Rodney. His father is in this!"

"Certainly we can't tell him. But we can be loyal to him. We can watch Joe and Henry and Nelse, when they come back. We can see just what they do, and see how it fits in with 'follow a-one loop'—that's a good 'loop' in the air, Pat. And we can see which one flies East and all the rest. Maybe, if we can find just what the plan is, we may be able to talk to Mr. Ellis, and show him how being honest and taking the consequences will pay best in the long run!"

"I'm with you!" Pat cried. Then he coined a new slogan, and for all his slowness, it showed a touch of genius.

"It will be 'Sky Scouts to the Rescue'!" he cried.

But neither he nor enthusiastic Tim foresaw the outcome!

CHAPTER VI

"CRAZY JENNY"

Rodney, walking rapidly down the dirt road beyond emergency field five, was busy with reflections. He was gone before the chase began.

"Why did that compass shift?" he wondered. "Could Joe have put any magnets in any place that would deflect it? He was the only one with any reason to do a thing like that. He might resent what my father did because his work wasn't good any more. Joe would be the type to hold a grudge for being discharged. And he worked somehow to get the assistant pilot's job with the firm that was just organizing, and he knew they would send him with Nelse."

Rodney was satisfied that Joe had a motive!

Then his mind flew off at an angle, to consider Nelse. Chief Pilots, selected from their dependability in emergencies, for stamina and character, would hardly be suspected of giving up as Nelse had done in an emergency.

Nevertheless Rodney had seen that white face, those set lips, the horrified, wide-eyed terror in Nelse's face.

As his eye roved across a small vineyard, he discerned the slender silhouette of a wireless aerial, a loop antenna, on top of a barn.

"There's the place for me!" he turned across the arbor-dotted field. "A loop antenna means a directional sending set, and I know Father will be close to his receiving, short-wave set at the plant.

"A directional loop must mean an amateur 'op' and he will be the sort of fellow to help me and keep a close mouth if I have to let him know anything about that compass," he concluded.

To his delight, Teddy Hawkins, when Rod called him to the door of the barn, was not only a clear-eyed, freckled, tall youth close to his own seventeen years of age; he was also a quick, alert amateur short-wave radio-telephone operator. With a substitution coil in one hand he awaited Rod's explanation as soon as the ceremony of mutual introduction was finished.

"Will I help you out?" Teddy responded with a pleased grin to Rod's hasty explanation of trouble and the landing of the air liner that caused him to want to "contact" his father. "Come right on up to my set. It's up in the haymow. Since we got a car we don't keep hay in it. I use it for a radio room."

Rodney followed him into the gloomy interior.

His eyes caught the loom of wings, dusty brown, and the shape of an airplane.

"For the sake of Caesar!" he exclaimed, "where did you get the old war Jenny?"

Teddy, moving over to the ladder leading upward, laughed. The ancient war type of airplane, engined by a Liberty, had been there, he explained, for years.

"Dad was a war ace, over in France," he explained, climbing the ladder with Rod at his heels. "When he came back—without a scratch, mind you!—he bought the old Jenny. He meant to stunt with it at carnivals. But he cut his hand on a common old sardine can, and wouldn't bother about it—till it was too late."

The war veteran, he added, ruefully, had lost an arm in peace-time in that prossaic way.

"He keeps the old crate right up to par, though," Teddy added. "He couldn't fly her, with his throttle arm gone, but he makes a little money, now and then, by selling some inventions, and so he keeps the old Jenny to experiment with. His pilot friends do his testing, and with the emergency field so handy, we run old Jen' out there and try things out. But she's a fussy old 'bus, and Dad won't let me fly her. She's all right until you force her—then she

'acts up' like anything! Even Daredevil Duncan came close to cracking up once because he forgot and gave her the gun to try for a higher ceiling than Jenny liked to go up to. She pancaked, and did the falling leaf and everything else. Duncan calls her 'Crazy Jenny.'"

"Daredevil Duncan!" Rod repeated. "He was in Father's corps over in France—you say your father is an inventor. Do they nickname him 'Gadgets'—you know, for all the gadgets he tacks onto a ship?"

"They certainly do! Your father knows him, I guess!"

"He does that! I often hear him tell our mechs. to try out one of Gadget's contrivances, and to give it a 'good break!'"

That drew the two closer at once.

Teddy lost no time in switching on and attuning his coils and condensers to the wave Rodney gave him, used by the aircraft plant in tests of radio-telephone and other safeguarding apparatus.

"Here they are." Teddy had called the letters of the plant, had finally raised an answer. "Rod Ellis wants to talk. Stand by!"

Rodney, thanking him, placed his lips to the transmitter, set the headphones over his ears and spoke.

"Hello—this you, Dad? Where is he?"

The hangar manager had responded. Mr. Ellis, he reported, had taken off a half hour after the departure of the air liner they were to deliver. "Flying one of the rich bugs down to Oakland," I hear the man reported. "Seems that one of them was delayed, and you know they are going to make the first good-will hop from Oakland to Los An' and on to San Diego and then down to Mexico City, with what the news fellows have called 'A Billion Dollar Passenger List.' One of them wanted to catch the 'bus, so your father is flying him, I suppose, in the two-place express crate he had thrown back on his hands last week."

Rodney was disappointed. He hesitated. Ought he to tell the hangar manager about the compass on the Oakland Queen?

"Here's a funny thing, too," the hangar manager went on. "You know we rebuilt the type of that ship the wings stripped off from, last year? Your father wanted to convince himself that wasn't an accident? Well, Rod, he sent that ship off for tests, just after the Oakland Queen left. The other ship has a radio—but we haven't had a word from her. I'm wondering if she's down, somewhere. Want to talk? Come in."

"All right. I don't know what to say, Mr.

Brill. Haven't you got somebody who can go aloft and locate the ship? Come in."

"All right! Well, I could, but there's no ship available."

Rodney did not prolong the talk. He could not issue instructions and with no available airplane at the plant there were no orders to issue had he possessed the right to give them.

"Rod—hurry!" called Teddy from the barn window. "There's a big 'bus coming over—hear those engines? Boy! She's some beautiful job! Look at those white wings! She's climbing pretty high—there! She's out of sight in the mist!"

Rodney got there just in time to locate the disappearing object.

A catch came into his breath. His throat felt tight.

There was the Oakland Queen!

They had not waited for him. Were his chums aloft or had they, too, been deserted?

"Teddy!" he caught the arm of his new acquaintance, "suppose I had to get to Oakland in a hurry. Do you think your dad would let me have the Jenny? It's terribly important."

He related some of the reasons—the compass, the mutiny, the dive, and the resulting necessity of placing the facts before the president of the new transport company, to prevent the flight

of the big liner until a careful check showed her to be still airworthy.

"I'll say Dad would let you! But he left the house before I got out of bed and I don't know when he will be back—or where to find him."

He led the way down the ladder.

"Tell you what!" he decided on a course of action, "we usually haul the crate over to take off from the field. Let's drag her over and then, if your friends are there, we can decide what to do. If they are gone—maybe we could warm her up and you could fly her.

"If you don't force her it will be safe enough, I expect!" he added.

Danger did not deter Rodney. He did not expect there would be need to force the ship. The liner could make Oakland airport in about three hours. The Jenny would require two more, at least, because it had not the power and the fog meant keeping low, following the coast, so that he could not avail himself of the higher altitude and the helping tail winds.

At the field there was no trace of his chums. He searched for a note, leaving Teddy beside the ancient airplane.

"Funny they didn't hide some word under a rock," he called.

Teddy did not respond at once. His eye caught the flutter of a bit of paper, but it did

not seem to be anything but a smudgy black slip.

Nevertheless he walked behind the tail of the Jenny and inspected it. He was about to call out as he saw "Ellis" on it—but he held his shout back as he read on, bent low, out of sight. "Hawk!" His father was in some queer business. He must see his father! He would not let Rodney know—just yet. He must know his father's wishes first!

As they took off, the smudged slip reposed in Teddy's pocket. Rod, unaware of its dire import, managed the strange ship carefully.

Crouched together in the tail of the air liner as it flew, hiding and unsuspected, Tim asked Pat for the note—and Pat discovered the hole in his coat pocket through which it must have fallen when, at the decision to be unseen passengers, they had gotton into the tail!

CHAPTER VII

MYSTERIES AND MISHAPS

LIKE a great many other people who will go along pleasantly and calmly as long as they are not forced to act against their placid wishes, the Curtiss Jenny, with its Liberty motor kept up to date and in perfect condition, behaved wonderfully for Rodney.

In time, with a low ceiling and very poor visibility, he located San Francisco Bay, across which was the airport.

He circled, watching for the change from the red signal on top of a hangar to the green which would signify to him that he could go in.

Teddy, who had studied the message covertly behind Rod's back, was even more anxious than was Rod for the landing when, finally, the tires took the runway and the old airplane taxied to a stop near the administration building.

Much to Rodney's discomfiture, the Oakland Queen was not there!

"Why, they come in all right," a pilot told him as he taxied to the parking space assigned the ship and went in to the registration desk

to carry out required formalities. "Seems they were pretty late and the ten rich chaps of that Billion Dollar Passenger List was mighty impatient. So they cut down the dedication and christening and speeches to the bone and took off about three-quarters of an hour ago."

The loss of the dry-as-dust speeches had been quite an improvement on the usual dull formalities of a dedication, he added.

"I'll gamble the radio listeners were glad, too," he added with a grin as Rodney showed his high rating and licensed right to fly a ship as long as he did not take pay for the service.

"Do you know if my father—Mr. Ellis—is here?"

The pilot shook his head.

"No, son. He set down with Joe—the lad who's assistant——"

"Joe!" Rodney gasped incredulously. He had last seen Joe at the emergency field, going off to search for soldering tools to repair a loosened wire on the ship's radio!

"Yes. Seems that your pop picked him up on distress signal. It sort of puzzles me, son. How come Joe to be left there. I wonder why the Queen set down there anyhow—and what happened?"

Rod, who knew most of that, said nothing. His father had been so secretive, recently. He had

been scheduled to fly one of the rich men down that morning. Instead, he had evidently flown his Express two-seater empty as far as passengers went, and had picked up the assistant pilot.

"Then what did Father do?" asked Rodney, while Teddy listened with intent ears.

"Why, son, he did a queer thing. He got a requisition for 'dope' and lacquer, and he loaded them into his 'bus—a whole lot of both! —and off he hopped without a word to anybody."

Rodney looked dismayed.

"Thank you, sir," he said and turned to leave, but a new thought made him turn back. "Did you hear anything of two friends of mine, 'Fat' Pat and 'Slim' Tim Kelly? They must have come down on the Oakland Queen. They were guests—" He did not add that he had also been scheduled to arrive with the ship.

"No boys got out," the man stated. "Only the mechanician, a chap called——"

"Henry! Yes, sir, I know. No boys?"

"None whatever."

"How about Nelse?"

"Chief Pilot? Wasn't aboard. Tell you, son, there is something mighty funny going on. Take that last! Mechanician brings in the 'bus, your pop brings in her assistant pilot, the Chief is

missing—and nobody willing to open the old jawbones and let out a word!"

"Thank you, sir." Rod touched Ted's arm and walked away with him.

"It is a funny business!" remarked Rodney.

"It's all of that. Rod—why not go and have a talk with the president of the transport company. He'd know everything. If he let that ship go aloft in a dangerous condition, let's find it out now!"

"I will."

Teddy suggested that in the meanwhile he would try to locate his father by telephone, to explain their use of the Jenny: his real anxiety was to communicate about that smudgy, distorted set of phrases he had in his pocket.

The air transport line's executive let Rodney cool his heels for a full hour. Finally he allowed Rodney to see him.

Rodney, facing thin-lipped, sharp-eyed Leonard Stedman, across his glass-topped mahogany desk, felt a slight uneasiness. The man was of the efficient, crisp business type; but no sympathy for youth, no good nature showed in those steelly gray eyes.

"I thing I ought to report to you, sir," Rodney began, a little uneasily. "I was on the Oakland Queen when Father sent the ship aloft and I know what happened——"

As briefly as he could, and skipping nothing important, only concealing the fact of Nelse's action until the man was present to speak in his own defense, Rodney related the story.

The executive listened without comment for the whole time.

"Ah!" he said when Rodney pointed out that if these things had not been known, there was still time to end the trip at Los Angeles, where the first scheduled stop would be made and where a banquet would be given for the wealthy pasengers.

He fixed Rodney with a cold regard.

"Now I'll tell one!" he said.

The somewhat slangy use of the phrase, implying doubt of his truthfulness, made Rodney wince.

"If you expect me to believe you, surely you will accept my fantastic story," he was informed.

Fidgeting, Rodney did not reply. He wanted to get away. Still, he waited.

"Mr. Ellis is in great financial distress," the man said in calm, cold tones. "His ship is not up to specifications. His credit and standing are gone."

He let these statements sink in.

"Therefore," Mr. Stedman continued, "with

his business on the edge of ruin, desperate, unable to design, to build, or to deliver an airworthy ship, he has sent down the best he could —and now has made plans to wreck it, possibly to collect insurance, almost certainly to drag a handsome ransom from ten of the richest men in this part of the world."

Rodney was stunned!

"I think—I think you are—mistaken, sir——"

"No, I'm not!" The words were snapped out like the lash of a whip.

"But—but you couldn't know that—and let the ship—go on——"

"Oh, yes I could. Why? Because the assistant, Joe, is trustworthy, and has been instructed. He will permit the ship to be forced down. Then—we will close down on the gentleman who instigated the most vile, diabolic plan I ever heard of!"

The man leaned back.

"I expect an S. O. S. from the liner within an hour," he remarked. "That is all. Good afternoon!"

Rodney almost staggered out.

His brain was in a tumult. His head whirled. Spots and whorls of fire seemed to dance before his eyes.

Teddy, watched him come along the corridor of the administration building, ignoring the

crowds of people, paying no heed to the usually attractive devices for comfort and safety that he passed.

The big weather board, with its tabulated weather reports caught by radio, from flying ships, by telephone and telegraph, from every source; the big revolving night beacon; the great landing light, the illuminated windcones and wind-tee, possessed no interest for Rodney.

"Here!" Teddy caught his arm as Rod was blundering past him, across the "apron" of concrete before the administration building, "don't you see that mail 'plane coming in? Want to get yourself spread all over the map? What's the matter?"

Rodney pulled himself together.

"Come on!" he urged. "Let's get the Jenny fueled up and go aloft before they refuse to release our ship." Curtly he repeated what the man had told him.

Teddy, who had been unable to learn anything about his father, or about Rod's parent either, followed, questioningly, eagerly.

"I've got to fly after that ship and try to locate Dad, somehow!" Rodney panted, hurrying to the parking space for airplanes. "There is something terrible going on. I don't know what it is. I must get to Los Angeles and try to see the Commerce Commission man there——"

While Teddy went to secure the essential release from the airport manager before the other executive should discover their intention and say a word against them, if he should be so minded, Rodney got more fuel into the Curtiss war biplane, and had it warmed up as Teddy came racing up. They taxied to the runways. The man in the control tower directed his beam of light upon Rodney, giving him the "all clear" signal by that clever device without confusion, without causing any other pilot to become confused or to think the signal—as with flags—might be for him.

As they rose into the air—the airport siren hooted its warning of distress to some ship. Its hoarse, bellowing low note, rising in a sharp, shrill octave to a screaming whine, sent chills through Rodney's spine.

His hand began to shake on the stick.

"Steady!" cried Ted, unheard in the roar of the old Liberty engine.

Rodney pulled himself together. After all, that call for all the airport personnel to assemble, for the "crash 'bus" driver and doctor to be ready, for rescue work to be organized, might not be for the Oakland Queen.

What did Leonard Stedman really know?

What was actually going on?

Rodney shifted the ailerons, banked, kicked

rudder, and swerved out to a course quite well away from shore as they swept along above the Golden Gate.

Teddy prodded him.

They could not talk. As Rod looked around, Teddy pointed inshore.

He had that message. He thought he understood it. That message instructed someone to stall down on an emergency field. The rest he was sure of, as well. Why was Rod flying out along the sea coast, wasting time?

Rodney, recalling the deflected compass, was seeking for the Oakland Queen, when they might overtake her, in the sea!

At least, he felt, with his knowledge, he might get to the spot as quickly as any, perhaps be able to indicate the spot for rescuers.

He held the course, climbing as high as he dared, in poor visibility. Teddy impatiently prodded him. Rod shook his head.

Then Teddy, desperate, passed over that smudged note.

As he read—the letters burning in hot fire in his brain!—his throttle hand moved instinctively back.

The Liberty stopped. He tried to catch it. Weak batteries denied it the hot spark. It refused to fire!

CHAPTER VIII

THE GRAVEYARD GLIDE

THERE was no superheating device for the fuel mixture on the old Liberty engine Rod had stalled.

Unlike the modern Oakland Queen, the old war biplane lacked the hot-spark generating devices that might start a warm engine if a cylinder was on the firing point.

Once stalled, the engine must be started by revolving the propeller to a firing point, exactly marked by a filed indicating spot on the body.

Over the Pacific, it could not be done.

"We'll get in all right!" Rod's first thought was for white-faced Teddy, sitting tense and frightened behind him.

"I know we'll get down," Teddy whispered, now that the Liberty was silent, "but how? Pancake into the ocean!"

"No!" Rod's thought was for their safety. "I can stretch the glide far enough to bring us over the beach. The sand ought to be hard."

He must stretch that glide!

At the same time, of all ships to force, the Jenny was likely to be most cantankerous. She would be fussy about keeping her flying speed; without it she would do almost any sort of dive, or slip.

"Keep the speed above thirty-seven!" urged Teddy.

Rod glanced at the altimeter, at the wind-speed needle also. The useless tachometer, oil and fuel pressure feeds he ignored.

"We'll make it!" he was more confident vocally than in his heart.

The problem of coming in, for at least a slight crack-up, the carrying away of the trucks or a nose over if the wheels stuck in sand, was nicely balanced by the need to maintain flying speed and the distance between them and the sand—and their height.

Over land they could have picked a spot, made the glide, even with no power, and got to some sort of a landing.

To get to the shore, Rod had to calculate nicely between the safe gliding angle, the amount of surging, tossing, hungry water between them and safety, and the altitude they had, which was not enough!

The thing that held his ship sustained in air, he knew, was the pressure generated by speed.

Speed meant the right depression of the nose

to make gravity pull them down while the air held them up; balancing those factors would enable the ship to fly with a dead stick; but always down, lower and lower, closer and closer to those upreaching crests of the sea.

Seconds seemed like eternities!

Forward, ever forward; but downward, always down, they sped.

"We can't make it—" Teddy's voice began to quaver. "I wish—I—ha-hadn't shown you that paper!"

Rod drove back the thoughts that pressed into his brain—his father accused by the transport company president — accused, too, by that smudged document! The airplane going down —to sink in the sea or to smash on the beach! Those thoughts he fought back.

"Sure! We'll make it, with a mile to spare!" He tried to laugh at Teddy's fears, but his tone came from his constricted throat like a hollow mockery of mirth.

"You know better — and — and — I c-can't sw-swim!"

"I can! If it comes to that, I'll take you in."

"If we get out from the wreckage——"

"Oh! Stop hanging crepe!" Rod snapped out the words, less in anger than to shock Teddy back to his common sense.

A frightened youth, not too light in build, would be a bad adversary in the water!

Three hundred feet—he read the altimeter. Seconds stretched out arms of hope, only to snatch away precious altitude as they sped through the hour glass of Time.

"There's the beach, almost under us!" Rod was cheerful.

"But—" Teddy compressed his lips.

Rod saw that there was a great mass of debris, driftwood or shells, in front of the nose.

The "graveyard" glide would barely take them to the beach.

They could not side-slip to avoid the debris.

"Safety belt tight?" he snapped out.

"Y-yes!"

"All right! Here goes!"

Clenching his teeth, Rodney saw the beach racing up at him—they would just about slap down at tide-line. The sand would be soggy-soft there.

They must not stop there.

Sharply, while still they had a trifle of speed, though the stall was close because the controls were sticky, heavy, Rod snapped up the elevators a trifle.

The nose moved upward for an instant.

They were over the soggy sand. Combers raced in under them.

The nose flipped down as the elevators were sharply depressed. In that fraction of time of uncertainty Rod's heart stopped beating.

Then the nose went down, and the barest trifle of speed under the pull of gravity took them past the water's edge. The wheels touched. Instantly the elevators were up again!

They did very little good, because the sand clutched at the wheels; but—to Rod's surprise, for it seemed almost the miraculous help of some Higher hand, the nose did not go down, and with a little groan from the trucks at the strain, and no serious damage, the Crazy Jenny belied her name and came to a safe, peaceful standstill.

"Well!" Rod spoke up cheerfully. He neither trembled from reaction nor quivered from nervousness. "Here we are."

But Teddy, not being an optimist, took the joy out of the achievement.

"I wish my father was as safe—and yours!"

Rod's heart sank.

That was true! "Ellis is the one!" said the note, and "Hawk" was directed to help "the one."

"We started out to find them both." Rod refused to allow himself to be long under the pall of dismay. "We won't get anywhere by crying. They used to say, the pilots did—'It's a good

landing if you can walk away from it!' I say it's a better one that we've made, because we can walk away with our ship—to some place where the engine can be started. Come on, Theodore. Grab that tail."

Automatically Teddy obeyed.

"Heave-ho!" cried Rod. "Out of the sand—and into the first good place for a take off!"

It took some time to find a possible runway; it took still more precious time to go over flying wires, landing wires, struts and brace-wires; it began to grow dusky, and the sun, breaking through the mist, gave the scene a queer, unearthly reddish bath as they warmed up the engine in a makeshift field, on a slight grade that would help them to get up.

"It's no use trying to locate anybody, now!" Teddy was disconsolate. "Let's fly home!"

"Not so you'd notice it!" snapped Rod. "Listen—and watch!"

He jumped into the cockpit, snapped his safety belt, jammed on his helmet and snapped the chin strap tight—then looked up.

There it was! The Oakland Queen, shining ruddily as the sun lit its white with rose and saffron. On its trail rose the Jenny!

CHAPTER IX

A GRATIFYING DISAPPOINTMENT

Rodney knew quite well, as he climbed into the clearing weather, with Teddy rapidly regaining his good spirits behind him, that he could not hope to keep up with the Oakland Queen.

All he meant to do was to follow, to catch up at Los Angeles, as he had failed to do at Oakland.

Jenny behaved as nicely as ever.

The banquet would be well under way, Rod surmised, by the time he reached the airport. The Oakland Queen would be refueling. He could leave Teddy to fuel up the Jenny while he tried, in every way he could think of, to find his father and Mr. Hawkins, or either one.

Then, if that failed, he and Teddy would take off, with full tanks, and get on to the southernmost city of the United States, San Diego, where the Oakland Queen was scheduled to lay over for the night hours beyond midnight.

In time the beacon at Los Angeles showed through the dispersing mists.

They watched for the red of two hangar-top lights to alter to green for them. Rod flashed his flying lights on and off several times as a signal that he wished to come down. Presently he got the green, shot the field, raced down the runway and let the Jenny run out of momentum where she would.

To his astonishment he heard a hail.

"Rodney! Oh, Rod!"

He looked around to see Tim racing toward him. Pat, clumsier, galloped like the baby elephant his brother called him, twenty feet behind him.

All plans were promptly altered. Rodney taxied to a parking place and left the small ship there while he threw aside helmet and goggles loaned by Teddy and presented the latter to his chums.

"Now—how in the world did you get here?" he demanded, as, arm-in-arm, the quartet strolled toward a quiet little restaurant.

"We stowed away in the tail," Tim explained. "You see, Rod—after you left—er——"

Rod produced the smeary note.

"We were afraid you had found it," Tim confessed that his hesitancy had come from knowledge that Pat had lost the note. But I hated to say anything if you hadn't!

Rod gave him a condensed explanation of what had happened.

Tim and Pat exchanged their own narrative by turns.

"We found that note," Tim took up the story from the place Pat ran out of breath and stopped interrupting. "We smeared graphite in the pencil dents and got the idea. But we couldn't believe it!"

"It's terrible," agreed Teddy, "but the man back in Oakland airport seemed to know something was to happen. But—tell what you have to tell first, Tim."

"We were arguing about the note, trying to make out what it really meant," Tim complied. "Then I thought, Rod, about how you talked of organizing the Sky Scouts, and I thought that was a fine chance to be loyal to you and your father by trying to prevent anything—wrong ——"

"What did you think would happen?" asked Rodney earnestly.

"We thought of salvage, insurance trickery—maybe ransom."

"So we decided not to stay where we were, after Nelse ran away—with Henry chasing him." Pat had recovered his breath. "Tim said we might be thrown out, or marooned."

"Air-ruined!" Tim laughed.

"Pat thought of hiding in the luggage compartment," he went on, "but I knew the passengers would have suitcases, so I suggested the tail——"

"We thought it was all right, and not really being stowaways," Pat broke in. "It was in a good cause, and we were really guests, anyway."

"I don't think they could call you stowaways," Rod chuckled, "but what then?"

"Oh—were we sick?" Tim looked rueful as he recalled the experience.

"If you want to get a roller-coaster and a scenic railway and a surf-board and an elevator and a chute-the-chutes and a balky broncho and a kicking mule all rolled into one—lie out full length in the cubby at the tail of an airplane," Pat suggested. "Rod—it flips up and drops down, and rolls, and bumps, and one minute you're on your nose and the next you're trying not to roll onto the control cables to the tail surfaces, and then you start up, and then a side wind hits the tail and fans you around till you're dizzy."

Rodney laughed.

"I remember once when a 'mech' was working in Dad's Jenny," Ted spoke up. "They didn't know about him and he couldn't get out or let them know, because the Liberty makes so much noise warming up; and they were test-

ing a new type of flipper and so they stunted—did that poor 'mech' come out grinning? Oh, yes—he did—not!"

"I wouldn't do it again, Sky Scout or no Sky Scout," declared Pat. "Let's see! What can a fellow just off shipboard after a storm, combined with a chap who has broken six broncs and breathed stale air—what can he eat?"

"Chili con carne, with lots of chili," Ted gave his order at the moment, "and a big piece of pie a la mode——"

Rod gave a modest order, and waited as patiently as he could for the three others to decide their portions.

"You don't act as though you had averted any tragedies," he said when the orders were in. "What happened?"

"Can you stand disappointment, Rod?"

The designer's son braced himself. "Yes," he said

"Well," Tim spoke deliberately, "we felt the ship gliding down, but that was only Oakland. We got over being ill, and felt the ship take off and then we felt badly again and then we felt the ship nose down, but it was——"

"For goodness' sake!" Teddy chuckled, "you are torturing poor Rod. What happened? What happened?" he repeated it emphatically.

"We landed, on a field," Tim responded, casually.

"Then what?"

"We took off again—and came to Los Angeles!"

"There was an S. O. S. as we went aloft at Oakland." Rod was very serious.

"Oh, yes—we heard about that!" Tim agreed. "After we got here, and found that Joe was flying the ship alone, we asked some questions as though we were strangers who had heard the sirens some time ago and wondered about them. We knew if Oakland got the call, Los An' would have it, too. And we heard that there was part of a signal received, a radiophone call for aid, but it never ended, and about ten minutes later another call came, and it was from the Oakland Queen, saying her radio had picked up a call that must have been sent out by some amateur trying to be funny. It was about the Oakland Queen, but it was some silly jack's idea of having fun by making trouble, because the ship was in perfect condition and on schedule!"

"So, you see, we all thought something terrible might happen—even the Leonard Stedman you told about," Pat said. "Aren't you disappointed, Rod—isn't it a gratifying sort of disappointment?"

"Yes," Rod agreed, soberly. "I am delighted to find out that you didn't really desert me, and that the ship is all right. But——"

"But what?"

"How about Nelse, Tim? And why did the mechanician bring the ship to Oakland and then let the assistant fly it to Los Angeles? And why can't we find Mr. Hawkins, or Dad?"

"Let's make the best of the good news we have," Tim urged. "The ship is safe, and Mr. Ellis didn't force her down or let any bears loose. The bears are those ten rich men—at least, if you'd see them at the banquet table you'd say so!"

They finished their own lunch and dinner merged into a quick meal, and went out to watch a ship come in. It set down and taxied in.

From it emerged two men in pilot dress. One spoke briefly to the other, left him and went on to the pilots' lockers.

The frock-coated, silk-hatted "Billion Dollar" passengers came out from the administration building dining hall, ushered by visitors and the Mayor and other officials.

Joe brought the warmed-up Oakland Queen to the "apron" and the passengers got in.

The signal was the only thing they needed before taxiing to the wind-facing end of the runway.

At that moment Rodney gripped a sleeve of Tim and Teddy.

"Look! There's Nelse!" he exclaimed.

"It's a man in his uniform—but it doesn't look like him!" Tim objected. They hurried to a point from which to get a better view—but the man was on board, the signal came—and the air liner moved off.

As the white ship rose in the air, banked, climbing, and turned South, to vanish into the night, they did not realize that she was also vanishing from their sight—whether to appear again or not no one except one person could guess—and that one wasn't telling!

CHAPTER X

SURPRISES

As THEY strolled over to the airport hotel to arrange for a night in Los Angeles, Tim took up the subject of the strange note they had all tried to decipher at various stages of their adventure.

"When I read that paper, on field five," he remarked, as they stood beside the main highroad, waiting for a chance to cross its heavy traffic, "I was excited. So was Pat. We read it almost exactly the way you and Ted did, Rodney."

"If we could find my father," Rodney said, "I know he could clear it up in a minute."

"Or mine!" Teddy added.

"I believe I can clear it up without either of them," asserted Tim.

"The brains of the Kelly family will now be displayed," Pat grinned. Tim turned on him.

"Yes," he said, argumentatively. "Slim Tim will clear up the fog in baby elephant's mental sky. Tim will 'avi-gate' through the fog."

"Never mind the sarcasm," urged Teddy. "What's your version?"

"Well, fellow Sky Scouts," Tim struck a pose, as though instructing a kindergarten class, "children, it is very simple. Much more simple than Pat's 'magnetic' mystery. Think hard, now, children. I will give you a hint. Suppose that Joe picked up a message about a moving picture play!"

"A movie scenario?" queried Teddy. "Tim! What in the world!"

"I think that furnishes a very easy explanation of that note."

"How?" Pat demanded.

"The movie people wouldn't send radio messages—and it was on Nelse's side of the ship we found it—and what would a movie scenario have to do with the Billion Dollar crowd, and 'the stork' and 'bears?'" asked Rodney.

"Let me answer Pat's 'how' and you will see a very simple explanation of everything," Tim urged.

They stopped, surrounded him, just at the edge of the road they would have to cross to reach the hotel.

"'Fire when ready, Gridley!'" Rod said, quoting a famous naval phrase.

"Bang!" Tim chuckled after his explosive exclamation. "I think we have happened on one

of the queerest mix-ups ever! Take this for a starter! Joe would probably like to be revenged on Rodney's father, so he would pick up any chance that offered. Suppose that he was fussing with the radiophone outfit on the liner and he picked up a message that seemed to him to be incriminating?"

"That would be far-fetched," objected Teddy.

"Wait, though. You've all read stories of real life where the things happened so strangely that if a story writer made novels with those things in them, the readers would say, 'That's a coincidence and couldn't happen.'"

"Well, for the sake of argument," Rod spoke, "find any coincidence that would fit in with 'Ellis is the one' and all the rest."

"That's easy," Tim retorted. "You all live close enough to the moving picture centers and read the movie magazines enough to know that all the studios are afraid that their novel ideas will be discovered by some other studio and made into films and sent around to theatres before they can get them out and score a 'beat.'"

"That's right," agreed Teddy. "Daredevil Duncan, the pilot who tests for my Dad, often hires out to movie concerns to do stunts in their pictures. But how does that fit this message of ours?"

"Well, Teddy," Tim was really a little proud

of his coming argument, as his face showed, "suppose that a movie concern planned to make a 'jungle" picture with an airplane stunt in it! Suppose the director, out at a zoo that they use near Los Angeles, was giving some instructions for his assistants."

They all understood how that might happen. In taking "big" scenes such as large expanses of sky, earth and jungle scenery, with airplanes above, animals and actors below, the principal director often resorted to radio-telephony to issue orders to his aides who might be far out of reach of the sound of his megaphone.

"Suppose a director was planning a 'big' wide-angle shot, maybe of animals attacking a party of people in the African 'veldt' and wanted an airplane to come to the rescue——"

"Do you know! That's mighty good!" Teddy interrupted. "Suppose Joe picked up .such. a message and it had the name of some other Ellis, maybe a stunt pilot! Joe would copy it down, as proof against the man he wanted to injure."

"It does explain a lot," Pat agreed. "Only—we found it on Nelse's side, with the written sheet torn off—and later, Henry ran away chasing Nelse who had a paper in his hand!"

"I can't explain that except by saying Nelse might have seen Joe writing, wondered about

it, asked—maybe Nelse wrote it and Joe found it and tore off the top sheet and stuck the pad back where he got it from!" Tim suggested. "Anyway, let's see how that would make the note sound."

"They are making a big scene," Rod agreed. "Go ahead—'Ellis is the one'—to do the flying stunt; maybe, instead, Ellis is the one who is to be picked off the ground in a big stunt!"

"I begin to see it!" Teddy exclaimed. "Ellis, an assistant director far away, gets orders, or Ellis, the stunt flyer, is chosen to do a stunt. No!" he had taken the paper from Rodney and studied it.

"You're right, you're wrong!" Tim sometimes used an Irish twist in his talk. "This is how it goes:

"Ellis, an assistant, is the one who will drive the stork, and make the bird go by force in the direction they've picked; then he will let bears loose——"

"But there comes the 'billion dollar crowd!' " objected Pat.

"And that's forgetting the part about Hawk," Rodney said, with a sympathetic glance at Teddy. "No, Tim, even though all the balance, with some stretching, might be in a way to conceal some radiophone directions, there's 'Ellis'

and 'Hawk' and the 'billion dollar crowd' to account for."

"I think so, too," Pat agreed.

"Let's forget it for awhile," urged Teddy. "Tim, you spoke about being Sky Scouts. Is it a secret order? Could I join. I'm as much interested as any of you, even Rod!"

They all agreed readily enough. The only secrecy pertaining to the Sky Scouts was in some emergency where they must keep close mouths.

While Pat and Tim instructed Teddy in the variations of code by which the standards, and purposes of the great and thriving Boy Scout movement were applied to their own little group, Rodney strolled thoughtfully away.

The missing Nelse bothered him. That unexpected figure, arriving so suddenly to board the air liner before it went aloft, who was in the uniform Nelse had worn, or a striking duplicate —but who was not Nelse—puzzled him. Something about the figure—walk, posture—seemed very familiar. He decided to let the others register for him while he went back to make some inquiries of people of the ground crews who had been in a better position to see the face of the mysterious new Chief Pilot.

They agreed to his suggestion.

Going back from the roadside, Rod had to

pass the parking space, where the airplanes lacking hangar space were staked down.

"I'll make sure the Jenny has a tight rope over the tail," he told himself. "After all we went through, I wouldn't want the wind to come up and twist her over and snap a wingtip. That would be like Teddy's father going through the war without a scratch and then losing an arm in peace times!"

The Jenny was staked properly, roped well and in no danger.

Rod strolled among the twenty-odd craft, noting how vast was the improvement in streamlining of struts and wires, in body design, in radial engines and propeller pitch since the old Jenny's heyday.

A curiously familiar ship snapped into his attention.

He hastened closer. There was no doubt of his immediate identification.

There, staked down, was his father's small, two-seater Express!

He stood, thinking. What did it mean? His father had not been around the field. Could it have been Mr. Ellis who went, in that uniform, to take Nelse's place in the Oakland Queen?

The walk and poise of the figure became meaningful!

Too far away to recognize him, Rod had seen

his father going aboard the air liner. He began to feel convinced of it.

He turned, raced among the biplanes, low-and-high-wing monoplanes and auto-gyros, calling as he neared his chums.

He stopped his shout as he saw that they were talking excitedly to a stout, excited gentleman at whose side one sleeve hung limp—empty.

"Rod! Hurry!" called Teddy. "Here's Father—and the fat's in the fire unless we can get a pilot and a ship, and you to fly the Jenny!"

The gratifying disappointment mentioned by Tim had become a disappointing gratification!

Mystery was in the air again!

CHAPTER XI

FOUR GO ALOFT!

TWENTY running strides brought Rodney close enough to see that Mr. Hawkins was in bad condition, physically and in his clothing; there were scratches and bruises on his face; his ordinary citizen's suit had several gashes in the coat and trousers.

"This is Rodney, Father," Teddy introduced the arriving youth most briefly.

Rodney shook the hand offered him and swift greetings were exchanged.

"You've been in an accident, sir," he exclaimed.

"Cracked up in a cabin ship. I understand you flew the Jenny." The man with one arm disregarded his own condition and went straight to the point. "Can you gas up and get aloft again right away?"

"Yes, sir—I could. But what has happened?"

Rodney felt that haste had secured little advantage so far. He had a right to know what he was to accomplish this time.

"Your father called me on the telephone last night. I was to help him with a little special

business today. I was to hire a cabin crate with four or six places, and meet him on a certain field, this afternoon. I got the 'bus, but we had an accident." He looked disgustedly at his torn clothes and bruises. "I'm out of the running. Had to get hitch-hikes to get here, and arrived too late to contact Ellis before the Queen took off."

"Then my father was the man who went along as Chief Pilot, in Nelse's uniform," Rodney broke in. "Where's Nelse?"

"Don't know. Don't care! Thing now is—you've got to overtake the Oakland Queen and tell your father to change his plans because I was an important factor—and I'm out of it!"

"But what is Father trying to do?" asked Rodney, eager to help but unwilling longer to make hurried leaps "in the dark" with no idea of the purpose.

"If you can't fly without knowing, come on, and let's get the Jenny gassed up—" Mr. Hawkins, limping, led the way toward the parking space. "Ted, run ahead with this other snappy young man and get the ropes off those wings and the tail. You, chubby," he nudged Pat, "go over to the hangar and have them shove a portable tank of gas here."

Rod had to admire the military snap and deftness of the orders.

The others hastened to their tasks.

"Your pa has suspected for a long time that somebody was trying to ruin his business." Hawkins spoke crisply, in the curt, if not unkind phrases of a man used to being obeyed and to impart information with no waste of time. "When he called me up he thought he had an idea of the final stroke against him."

"To damage the Oakland Queen, sir?"

Mr. Hawkins nodded.

"Who is in the scheme?" asked Rodney. "Joe and Nelse and Henry, or just one of them?"

That was not known to the former war ace. He told Rodney so.

"All he knew last night was that a plan had been hatched to force the new ship to land by some plan he couldn't discover. That was not all, though. The people behind the scheme wanted to hold the wealthy passengers for ransom. At least that is Ellis' idea. He decided to go them one better!"

"How, sir?"

They were beside the small ship, already freed from its stakes and ropes. A man was approaching with a wheeled-cart carrying a tank of fuel gas. Teddy was wiping over struts and wires with a soft cloth to detect any fraying as he also cleaned up the craft.

"Your father proposed to land the air liner,

with the help of his personal friend, Henry, who is mechanician on the 'bus. Stall down by killing the engines, or some such way. Then your father was to meet the ship, with his own rebuilt crate—the model of the one——"

"I know, sir." Rodney wanted to save explanations by identifying the ship reported earlier to be out on test by the hangar manager at the plant. That accounted for no test reports, and the ship's long absence from its base.

"Ellis planned to fill that ship with tough, roustabout men, picked up in San Francisco—men who would fight and like it. I was to meet the whole crowd at emergency field eleven, and there the rich men were to have things explained to them. They would fall in with Ellis' idea of transferring them to the other ship."

More points were becoming clear to Rodney at each sentence. The meaning of "dead stick stall" and "on eleven" and other parts of the graphited paper were clear.

To save himself and the new ship Mr. Ellis was preparing to substitute for the rich passengers others who would not hesitate to give battle to whosoever they met with evil intentions toward their employer and his biggest air liner.

To get them all together, Rod decided, his father had provided the second ship, the re-

built, remodeled type that had stripped its wings in a crack-up. In that the rough duplicates would arrive. The real rich men would then be told how to escape being caught and held for ransom.

"I see," Rod said. "The fighters will get in the Oakland Queen, and go on, while the rich men will come back in the substitute ship."

"Well, not that exactly. The way the ship was to be forced down, as closely as I come to it, was by misleading it, in the fog, to some place where it could be forced down and its people held captive."

Rodney knew what was meant to happen—not holding the rich ones, but releasing, to destroy them, ferocious bears!

He was about to add this bit of information; but Hawkins, with military impatience, broke in to finish his story. He gestured for quiet.

"Ellis planned to send the duplicate ship right on, with the real millionaires aboard. The roustabouts, in the other—the real Queen—he meant to take right into the lion's mouth, by following up the clue he had.

"In that way he would discover who was behind the plan."

"What was your job—and the need for the third ship?" Tim asked.

"To take a few of the millionaires East. I

don't know why. A 'looie' doesn't ask his General the whys, unless he's a 'shavetail!'" snapped Hawkins. "Well, everything's all right. Get that Jenny out on the runway and warm it up! I'll have your release by the time you are ready to go aloft."

Rodney signaled to Teddy, who went to the propeller and called the first exchange of "Switch off—gas on!"

But Teddy's face was rueful, as was Pat's. Both felt that Mr. Hawkins would fly with Rodney.

Tim, going over in his quick mind the phrases as he recalled them, realized that the supposedly wicked purpose revealed by the smudged note were really statements of worthy objects and the necessary orders to help someone to carry them out.

"'Ellis is the one,'" he murmured. "They ——"

He caught Rodney's arm.

"In that message," he cried, "Rod—it says your father is 'the one!' That means that somebody has found out his plan. And—the note says 'Hawk!'"

Rodney produced it.

Hawkins took it, snapped on the flying lights, studied the note.

"'Hawk' nothing!" he said gruffly. "This

isn't about me! Don't wonder a bit that you mistook it—the stuff is all smeared up. But it's an 'n' and not a 'w'—see, the second one!"

Rodney and the others inspected it, Teddy leaving his starting place to join them. "We misread those blurred words," he said excitedly.

"It is an 'n' at that!" agreed Tim. "And this is 'rock-et'—not 'it.'"

"That makes it—" began Pat.

"Hank!" cried Rodney—and laughed. "And 'blue rocket!'" he added.

"That's your father's nickname for Henry!" Tim ejaculated.

"All right—Henry is with our side!" Teddy added. "Let's get the Jenny warmed up, Rod." He went back to the prop. "Switch off——"

"Switch off!"

"Gas on!"

"Gas on!"

Rodney repeated with careful exactness the calls.

Presently the propeller was on a firing position mark.

"Contact!" yelled Teddy, sprinting away as Rod threw in the ignition and the big arc of flashing, whirling leaves became a completed circle that blurred into a wheel of flashes of light from the propellor blades when Rod revved up the Liberty.

"Tim," Mr. Hawkins turned to one of the twins, "see if you can find a pilot with a two-seater—no, I'll do that as I get Rodney's release——"

"Excuse me, sir," Pat went closer, "Tim has had about fifteen hours solo in Mr. Ellis' Express high-wing—and yonder it stands! Why can't he fly it if you need another 'bus?"

"He can! Got your license, buddy? Good! The second ship is still waiting on emergency field eleven—and I want somebody to fly there and wait, close to a telephone that is in one of the boundary pylons until Rod overtakes the ship now flying with his father aboard toward San Diego. He can flash them a signal with his flying lights."

Eagerly the four youthful air enthusiasts listened to his orders.

"The Express high-wing monoplane is equipped with a receiving set," Rod informed their "lieutenant."

"Splendid! Tim, you'd better take my son along. He can—— "

"Tim can operate, too!" Rodney told him.

"Then let Pat go with his brother," Mr. Hawkins arranged the flight. "Pat can stand by at the pylon telephone. Tim can cut in with the Express receiver. Rod, you can signal the Oakland Queen, and tell the people on that ship

to radiophone Tim, and Pat will relay changes in plan to me, here. Ted had better go with you, Rodney, for while the Jenny has no radio, he knows its kinks and peculiarities, and he will be able to help you follow the airway."

They were all elated that he had given each one a share in the flight and the Sky Scouts, excited but careful, got the Express high-wing out with the Jenny while Mr. Hawkins hurried off to arrange the permission for take off.

"Rod," Tim went close to his chum, far enough away from Teddy not to be overheard by him, "did you notice what Ted said, when he whirled the Jenny's 'prop?'"

"Yes. 'Contact!' It's an old war-time expression, where our mechs usually say 'Gas off, switch on' before they yank down the blade for the firing stroke."

"Oh! It seemed different."

"Lots of old pilots use that phrase," Rod replied. "Probably he got it from his ace of a father!"

As the two airplanes rose into the night sky, each pair of Sky Scouts wondered what would be discovered at the end of the respective flights.

Not one of the four going aloft guessed correctly.

CHAPTER XII

TWO "GO ON THE AIR"

WITHOUT much difficulty Tim located emergency field eleven after a flight that had no complicating developments to tax his skill.

The light Express ship, with its speedy radial engine, was no stranger to the young amateur.

Taking an interest in the aspiring youth, Mr. Ellis had sent Tim to a flying school, and after dual instruction there, had turned him over to Rodney for further work aloft.

In the light ship Tim had flown more than fifteen hours and with the abrupt, but explicit directions given him by Mr. Hawkins, the amateur pilot, with his temporary student's license, was able to find his way, guided by the well-lighted airways he had to follow.

Pat, admiring his brother's calm handling of the small dips and shifts which were the only bits of excitement during the flight, saw the boundary beacon of field eleven at a distance and searched the space enclosed in glowing neon markers with eager eyes.

To his dismay, no large airplane revealed itself.

"Maybe they have it hidden," Pat decided. Certainly, according to the story told by Teddy's father, this was the place where the ship from the airplane construction base would be waiting.

After its flight from the base under one of the plant's test pilots, it should have been joined on field eleven by Henry, the mechanician who—if Mr. Hawkins told the true facts—had brought the Oakland Queen in at Oakland. There he should have deserted his engines, leaving them in charge of another specialist employed by the ship's new owners.

After that, still trusting Hawkins' account, given while the two small airplanes had been warming up, Henry should have engaged men in San Francisco, secured a motor 'bus skirting the field on its trip leading to another town. Delivering them and releasing the other pilot, Henry should be waiting on field eleven with his men and with the ship, busy "doping" and lacquering the dark craft with pigments that would alter it into a close semblance of the Oakland Queen.

But there was no such activity, and no such changed craft visible.

Using the under-lights which were part of the

Express ship's equipment for night landings, Tim flew across the field, quite low, peering over the cowling; then he circled the field.

Pat realized what was in his brother's mind. They thought alike.

Some further cog in the plans made by Rod's father had slipped!

Tim shot the field, came in and managed a fairly good landing, putting some strain on the trucks, but breaking nothing. He had not gained sufficient experience at judging height from the ground to level off at exactly the best point—about four feet above the earth; his stall, a trifle above that, let them down with quite a thump. But nothing worse happened because, as the ship ran forward, Tim got the flippers down quickly so that the light craft did not hop upward again, only showing a tendency to do so from the rebound of its spring shock absorbers. He also counteracted the nose-over that would have smashed a propeller, by catching the flippers almost instantly with the stick back a trifle, so that the tail sank again and its skid dragged them to a standstill.

Promptly Tim cut out the engine.

"There's no airplane here!" he turned to Pat.

"Something has gone wrong again!" Pat was despondent. "I wonder what it is this time—and how we will find out?"

Tim sat in deep thought.

"I don't know why we didn't think of it before!" he said presently, indicating the small, compact radio set on the instrument assembly panel. "Mr. Hawkins was in such a hurry to get us aloft and I was so excited that when Rod said I could operate a radio set, I didn't say what I should have said."

"That Mr. Ellis wouldn't broadcast his plans for the enemy to pick up," responded Pat.

"That's it. Baby elephant, once in awhile you do have a sensible idea."

"I'd have them oftener if you didn't try to make folks think you had all the Kelly brains."

Tim laughed.

"If you'd have the right sort of ideas steadily, not in fits and starts," he admonished, "I'd give you credit. You ought to exercise your brain more, instead of only once in a blue moon."

He left the underbody lights on, and by the refracted glow from the dirt on which they had come to a stop, manipulated the switches, rheostats and tuning dial of the receiving set.

"Get under, and pull out the hanging aerial," he ordered. "Run it off, down the field, so I can get the full advantage of all the wire."

He waited while Pat, clumsily, secured the end of a cable which was arranged to drop from

a port, unreeling from a drum, during flight.

Pat, getting to his feet, walked away as far as the wire would uncoil. He stood holding it.

"What's he after?" Pat reflected. "If Mr. Ellis won't broadcast his plans, what can Tim pick up?"

It puzzled him.

Laying the wire on the ground he ran back to the small airplane to satisfy himself. Tim, he argued to himself, had let himself say no message would be received, and then had shown himself to be in the same class with his twin by preparing to receive one.

Tim looked up as Pat began to tell him about that.

"This is an example of what I mean when I say you don't use your head," Tim remarked, chidingly. "You've put the bare wire on the earth. Don't you know that the grounded wire won't let anything run into the coils in the set, that way?"

"But if I stand and hold it," Pat thought he had caught Tim napping, "I'm 'grounded' and so is the wire."

"But you have a lot of resistance!" Tim laughed. "A human body has resistance. But, at that, maybe we'd do better to haul the ship near that wooden post, and attach the wire to

the glass insulator they've put on the pylon for the marker-light wire."

While they revised the arrangement Pat, in his turn, chuckled.

"The Kelly brains!" he said sarcastically, "not working so well."

"Why not?"

"One minute you say Mr. Ellis won't broadcast his plans. The next you are trying to pick him up."

"No, I'm not!" defended Tim. "But—if you'd stir up the gray matter under your belt buckle, you'd realize—that—the enemy—might talk!"

Pat was silenced.

Tim, tuning and listening, was disappointed.

"Only ships, and somebody with a damped-spark sender!" he grumbled. "Dit-dah! Dah-dit—just the International code stuff. Some 'op' telling about his last trip over from Honolulu."

He switched to another wave-band, tuned and gave close attention.

"That's better," he remarked. "Here's San Diego—wait! Calling! The operator is calling to ask of the Oakland Queen——"

"Then it hasn't reached there!" cried Pat.

"Sh-h! No—it isn't the regular 'op.' Calls like an amateur. Pshaw! There's another call, overlapping. They're interfering with each

other. Can't get either one sharp. The other breaks in. Keeps calling." Tim began to show excitement. "I wish that amateur would be still for a minute—I think the Queen——"

"What do they say?" Pat cried eagerly.

"One of you shut up! Don't both talk at the——"

Pat knew his brother was speaking to the invisible pair of operators who could not hear him.

Pat waited, eager, wistful.

"What?——"

"Sh-h!"

After a moment Tim put down the headset.

His face was a study of mixed emotions as he turned to Pat.

"Between calls from San Diego, I caught a few words from the other transmitter," he said. "Neither one seemed to know the other was on the air. From what I heard I think one was Rod, trying to contact the Oakland Queen—through Teddy!"

"What was the other?"

"The Oakland Queen—I caught 'driven down —Lion's'——"

"Lion's mouth!" finished Pat. "That was in the note!"

"So it was. But the Oakland Queen wasn't going to fly there until the exchange of pas-

sengers was made. Where can that other ship be?"

"I don't know, and I don't care!" Pat was greatly excited. "But one thing I do know and care about. If someone was going to force down the stork—the Oakland Queen, in the Lion's mouth—I know where to find it!"

"You do?"

"Yes! I may not be smart, but when I see a thing, I remember it!"

"What have you seen, Pat?" eagerly, anxiously.

Pat told him. "On a chart! Lion Mountain, with a gorge for a mouth."

Fifteen minutes later the Express high-wing was again aloft, and its impulsive occupants were bound for Mexico.

CHAPTER XIII

LURING LIGHTS

WITH Teddy, in the surprisingly well-behaved Jenny, Rodney made a neat landing in a small field at San Diego.

"The Oakland Queen hasn't arrived!" Teddy said as soon as he got out. "Now she could have been here twice while we flew the distance. We didn't pass her! What do you make of it?"

"With that deflecting compass, and with Joe aboard, any guess might be right or wrong. Mine is that we won't see that ship for some time! They might fly out over the sea, with the compass 'off.' They might pretend it was 'off' and make a course correction in the opposite direction, and land among the hills."

"Suppose I call Dad," Teddy suggested. "You be refueling."

They carried out the plan. Teddy came back with instructions. If Rod was not too air weary, Hawkins suggested that he go aloft, fly in sweeping circles, always working backward from San Diego toward Los Angeles. Meanwhile Teddy could find an amateur "op" and

listen in on the wave length assigned to the Oakland Queen's class of air traffic.

Ten minutes later Rod was aloft, and the lights of the San Diego field were far behind.

He was greatly excited, dreadfully concerned, a good deal worried; but with a rueful grimace he recalled what excitement and "forcing" had done for the Jenny before.

"There's two kinds of 'control' in a crate," he mused. "One works ailerons, flippers and rudder, with the stick and bar. The other is the control a pilot has over his own actions. And that," he added, "is one sort of 'control job' I won't go wrong on again."

He had some blue Verey lights, and several rockets handy in the cockpit. Those, if he saw the Oakland Queen, would be recognized as an identifying signal—"blue rockets" would perhaps come in handy.

Teddy, at the air field, was interesting an amateur radio-telephone operator in the emergency.

"Certainly I'll let you use my set," the amateur "op" agreed, and stood by while Ted began his monotonous calls.

"W 2 X-L-O calling Oakland Queen. Oakland Queen—come in!"

And repeated, the sing-song call, with pauses

for listening, went on as Rod, high in air, swung like a questing hawk on his great arc.

Tim and Pat, at that time, were working with the set in the Express 'plane.

Rod saw the flicker and flash of a ruddy light, quite far to the Southeast of his big swing.

"I wonder if that could be a signal," he muttered. "Red—now it's green—I'd better swing over and see!"

In the amateur "op's" radio room Ted, with aching ears, looked up disappointedly. "There's no reply," he stated.

"Let me work awhile," urged the amateur. Teddy gladly turned over headset and chair. The amateur, an excitable, eager person, younger and less experienced than Ted, began his calling; but he failed to give much time to the switch-over to listen for a response.

It was his call that went to Tim and Pat as the Oakland Queen seemed to be sending out her signal.

As the distress call went out, from a point close to the Mexican border, Rodney, miles to the Eastward, almost in the hills, saw, with disgust, that he had wasted his time.

Dipping low, over an open space beside an adobe-walled house, he ascertained that he had flown over all that country to locate the fireworks display of some celebrating Mexicans

who were setting off pinwheels, firecrackers and Roman candles on the night of some private "fiesta."

As he swung back, to retrace his line of flight, the young pilot lifted his head, as was his habit, to glance alertly around to spot any ships into whose path he might be swinging.

Far to the South of his position he saw what seemed at first to be the flash of a descending meteor.

"But it's blue!" he muttered.

He swung the bank to the opposite tilt, kicking opposite rudder, so that he could get the nose to a point from which he could watch.

Again that bluish glare, a streak of fire cascading down in a curve, faint with the distance but unmistakable in tint, culminating just at the horizon in a flash of faintly blue fire!

"But meteors are yellowish or electric-flash white!" he mused.

Still a third flash broke across the far horizon.

The solution snapped into his brain.

"Blue Rocket!" he exclaimed.

But rockets went up!

These flashing comets with their blue heads were going down!

It intrigued and puzzled Rodney.

Still—blue rockets!

He put the throttle forward steadily, not lift-

ing the nose, but holding his altitude steady so as to gain his best safe speed most quickly. As the nose swerved onto a line with the last faint glow of the third cascading blue light, he corrected to neutral, held steady and followed the line of flight that would carry him down to where the flashes had faded into nothing.

Using every revolution of the engine that he dared to crowd on, he scanned the line ahead for further flashes.

There were no more, and he held to his course, catching the datum line of the next beacon, following that, keeping on, ever on!

"This is pretty close to where the lights must have been," he said under his breath after a good half-hour of steady progress.

The silent, dark night gave no answer to his puzzled inquiry:

"What could it have been?"

Suddenly he became tense.

Far ahead, as though it were some will-o'-the-wisp dancing in front of him, he saw once more the flick of a descending streak of fire.

He forgot caution, forgot the Jenny's reputation. Of only the need for speed was he conscious as he thrust the throttle still further in its quadrant.

The Liberty responded with an increased roar, and then settled into the hum which older

pilots had often told him was a sign of the perfect synchronization of every working part. The vibation fell to a low point, the hum was smoother than the roar had been.

"I do believe they are all wrong about this ship," he murmured. "At top speed she runs nicer than when I hold her back!"

He sent the miles scurrying back under his trucks.

Again, and once more far beyond him, that baffling, ghost-like flash of descending flame, to end in a blue puff, called tauntingly in the mysterious darkness.

Rodney could get no more from his engine. What could that light mean, fleeter than he, keeping beyond him always?

Still he doggedly held his course, parallel with the airway lights but to the East, toward the rocky hills. The less developed lighting told him he had again passed San Diego, visible to his right side.

He was going into Mexico.

His hand on the stick tightened.

There was one more blue puff well ahead.

In its light, several miles away, he thought he detected the loom of a small object high in air. Or were there two?

He dared not tax the Liberty more. Catching the dip of the nose that followed his convulsive

grip and tensing of muscles on the stick, Rodney steadied the ship, and began to climb it to get as wide a range of vision as possible.

He lost speed, but he knew that he must go higher, he felt that at his present altitude he had insufficient range in case of any emergency and some sixth sense, making him shiver a trifle, told him there was an emergency. Besides, he was coming to hill country!

It took little time for him to close the gap between his last sight of the mystifying blue puffs and the scene of an amazing activity.

Far below, in the hilly country over which the pursuit of the will-o'-the-wisp had led him, in a deep canyon, he discerned the glow and pulsation of a fire, a big, well-tended bonfire.

The surrounding hills, foot-stools for the higher cordilleras beyond, closed tightly around that ruddy cavern, that red abyss, a wide gash of color in a black series of crests.

But one glance was all that Rodney gave the strange formation and its equally curious light effect. It made him think of something he had seen—or read about—or recently recalled! He had little time to consider how, where, when or why it had been brought to mind.

But he knew that he had looked down into that gash called in his charts, "The Lion's Mouth"—and a most unsafe spot for airplanes!

That was all the time he could give to it—remembering it!

Closer, and almost under his wings, thrown into black by the great red maw of the lion's opened mouth, with craggy tusks of rock, were two great airplanes.

They were maneuvering, going through some strange dance, some queer and inexplicable tactics.

At first, absorbed by the recognition that one was the Oakland Queen, the young pilot, almost at his own ship's "ceiling," gave little heed to the other.

They seemed to be maneuvering for some advantageous position, there high in the air, above that yawning, hungry red gullet in the peak that looked so much like a lion's head. Rocks were its fangs; fire was its tongue!

Rodney gasped.

"I know that lower ship is the Oakland Queen—it isn't the duplicate," he muttered. "Our other big ship might fool some folks — but I know the wing sweepback, and the lines too well to be fooled. But I don't think the other ship is our duplicate one. It's too dark to be sure, though. It's big—and it's fast!"

He watched the maneuvers. Heavy though the ships were, they flew well, and, as Rod saw, handled beautifully.

Experts were in each control seat.

"It seems as though one is trying to get above the other!" Rod declared, excitedly, to himself, "and now—the Oakland Queen seems to be unable to climb as fast as the other. Why doesn't she fly away? Why does she keep circling? Is she looking for a landing? There isn't a place that I can see. And—ahead there—oh!"

The long gash, lit within by its huge bonfire, sent rays streaking in fantastic gusts toward the higher peaks. At each side was rock. At the far end—a great, jagged fang of rock stood up like a tusk, and a ship, flying the gorge, unable to turn to either side, must either climb above that fang or be dashed against it.

"The other ship is getting above the Oakland Queen—why don't you climb! Climb!" Rod yelled as if his puny tones could ride through the sullen, deep roar of his own and the other engines, there in the peaks that flung back mocking echoes.

The ghost ship, the strange airplane, was on the tail of the other. Was it riding down the Oakland Queen?

"I must do something!" panted Rodney, high above. "I can't let the Oakland Queen be driven down—into the Lion's maw!——"

CHAPTER XIV

BLUE ROCKETS!

MANY a breath-taking recital had Rodney had from his father about the military air battles over the trench-gashed fields of France.

This was different.

There the ships had been light attack 'planes, single seaters with machine guns synchronized to fire between the racing blades of the props; or two-seater observation and fighting craft like the Jenny he sat in; or bigger bombers. There the terrain had been cut and torn by shell and bomb.

Here the adversaries were heavy, steady-going transport cabin ships not built for maneuvers; the terrain was upflung rock cut and torn by Nature's convulsions.

Yet the battle here was as deadly.

Perhaps because of fewer passengers, the rebuilt ship had managed to outclimb the air liner put in commission that day.

Barrel rolls, Immelmann turns, loops, were out of the question.

None of the war maneuvers would serve.

It seemed that the air liner could not escape.

Rod saw why.

The flares had been lighted, had been dropped, to give her pilot a means of judging his height from the rocks.

His instruments, especially the altimeter, showing sea level altitude, helped none in the present emergency.

And Rod knew the air liner lacked the altitude for safe side-slips, must crash into rocks if she tried to escape by such tactics.

The higher ship had the advantage; following, close above the tail of the apparently doomed liner, she could side-slip also, and still have just enough height to zoom to safety and climb away!

A very devil, diabolical, reckless, such an one as Daredevil Duncan could be, Rod thought, the pilot of the substitute ship had out-guessed the air liner.

Higher, yet able to drive the liner like a stricken, baffled sheep being forced into the neck of a trap, the remodeled airplane had made the liner swing into the upper elevation of that great creased fold of rocks that was the lip of the Lion's maw.

To swerve right or left would drive the liner into rocks.

Only straight ahead, down the gash, and, by

some miracle of power, climbing above the tusk at the far end, could the liner have the thin chance of escape.

And with that whirling propeller coming down to drive her, in the throes of her death flight, to dive lower, there was hardly a leeway of five seconds before any action to help her must be too late!

Rodney did not waste a second.

Those rockets he had secured for signals, lying close at hand, must do what otherwise there was no time to accomplish.

Self-igniting by the jerk of their tiny detonators as they were thrown, those rockets would fling their fiery trails downward, to burst into blue as Rod had seen them do before.

If he could get one to fall right across the propeller, maybe into it, the pursuing avenger, that mysteriously devilish ship pursuing his father, must be disconcerted.

Without an instant of delay Rod had a rocket going.

Down it went, describing the arc he had meant it to take.

He looked desperately over his cockpit cowling, past the wings.

Curving its trail, the fire-tail of a comet, unexpectedly the missile flew across the propeller of the pursuing ship.

Into that mass of fire the ship plunged, unable to avert catastrophe!

"I couldn't help it!" Rodney felt ill at what he had done. "Dad is in that other ship!"

The very instant that he released the rocket the first craft, the real Oakland Queen, taking that desperate chance Rodney had forevisioned, trusting to her power plant, zoomed and then climbed desperately to get above the upthrust finger of doom ahead of her.

Rod did not dare to look that way.

Nor could he force his aching eyelids to close.

He must look down.

Beneath him, ignited by the trail of flaming particles into which it had been compelled to drive, the other ship, with its wingtip flaming, was making a desperate effort to glide into some small margin of possible safety for a landing.

Plateaus there may have been. Shelves of rock Rod guessed at.

But with the wing flaming, the ship tilted, side-slipped, crashed against a rock, and settled into the chasm, Rod supposed—he had shut his eyes.

The dip of his own Jenny brought him back to a realization of his own unsafe position.

Desperately he forced himself to look around.

Down below the flames seemed brighter. Was

it because he had lost altitude? Were they closer?

Or had some already fired fabric gone down to add its gasoline and oil to the ruddy gullet of that monster formation underneath him?

He turned his eyes toward the upflung jag of rock ahead.

He, too, must pass that sentinel, and his altitude was now as low as had been that of the others. He opened the throttle, elevated the flippers, and waited.

Barely topping the rocky finger, he got away!

But he could see nothing of the air liner! It had vanished!

Recalling how his father had probably dropped over the blue rockets to light up the crags and see his altitude, Rodney thought that he could use those he had brought for the same purpose.

Possibly the bursting head of a rocket would disclose the fate of the vanished air liner.

Over went the rocket, igniting and flashing in a long, sidewise arc to burst low among the rocky crevasses.

Rodney took advantage of its flash and glow to look around.

To his surprise, from a point far ahead rose, straight into the air, the fiery trail of a rocket that burst in a cascading flash of blue!

Rod pushed forward the throttle lever, and began to circle in that direction. Coming to the proper point, he applied opposite rudder and stick—and, amazed, saw a blue rocket bursting in pale fire far to the North, beyond his ship's tail.

He believed he had gotten turned around in the confusing darkness, and that he had missed the correct point to end his turn. He swung sharply back to catch the light over the nose before it died.

But another blue flash came into being and was gone, before he got around.

North, South—blue rockets!

What could it mean? Who sent them up? Friends—foes—or were they the illusions of his over-excited brain? Was he "seeing things" as he had thought, before?

A warning sputter of the engine recalled him to the fact that he was flying an old Curtiss war 'plane with an engine that had to be "babied" and no modern wing-tank reserves of fuel.

The gas was getting low! He must find a spot to land—among crags, in midnight stillness!

His only landing lights must be his reserve of blue rockets!

"Well," he caught one off the floor, "here goes!"

CHAPTER XV

TIM FLIES "BLIND"

With excitement and anxiety prompting him to take risks, Tim kept his head.

He knew the little Express speed 'plane and he had been aloft in it often enough not to be in the least afraid of any ordinary air condition.

At the same time, with darkness, strange country and an exciting quest to face, he preferred not to pile on the additional handicap of recklessness.

Therefore he flew straight back to the Los Angeles airport, got his signal to come in, set down as carefully as he could, and sent Pat scampering to locate Mr. Hawkins. The meeting place he appointed was before the weather board.

Rapidly he jotted down all the weather conditions posted, for the lower California section.

"Hello!" Ted's father greeting him hurrying from the hotel with Pat.

Rapidly Tim sketched in what Pat had not told—the need for flying charts, and Tim's purpose to fly on.

"I wish I could go along—and it's game of you to be willing to fly it 'blind,'" the older pilot declared. "I think I'm better off here, because there isn't any other centralized point where everybody can make contact and report and get orders."

While he talked he assembled weather data and secured a chart.

"I know the section they call 'The Lion,' and there is a big crevasse in those hills that look so much like a crouched lion with his head facing the ocean. That's the Lion's Mouth of your note, no doubt. But it's risky country for an amateur to fly over at night."

"If you can chart me a line-of-flight, sir," Tim said hurriedly, "I'll take all the precautions I can to stay up and get there. I think the air liner was lured there, maybe, in spite of being forewarned."

"I can't see how it would be lured," argued Pat.

"It was part of the plan made by Ellis that he would take the liner 'into the Lion's Mouth,'" Hawkins observed, rapidly working out the mathematical formula for getting a line-of-flight from a given point to a distant area, accounting for wind-drift, and other factors that might veer the ship off the airline she must follow to get there in the most direct fashion.

"But he wouldn't go there with the real millionaires!" objected Pat.

"No!" Hawkins agreed, ruling down a straight course on the chart and making the angles required for the computation he worked on. "Like all the rest of this business, this doesn't fit in. It's as wild and apparently senseless as can be."

"But it will all come right, and we'll see it, some time." Pat was always ready to look forward to bright times. "We'll know why the compass was deflected toward the ocean course while the ship has really been taken Eastward into the hills."

"And why Joe and Nelse went off, and what Nelse ran away with, and why the 'mech' chased him and then came back, flew in the ship himself and then disappeared to take over the substitute ship."

"More than that, we'll discover what happened to the substitute ship and the roughs who were to go into the Lion's Mouth with Rod's dad."

"Yes, and all the rest!" Mr. Hawkins stood up. "Here's your chart. Pat will get a Gossport helmet, using the speaking tube to give you his observations, through your headpiece, as you stick to your control job," Hawkins added.

"I've had the ship refueled and kept warm. Let's go!"

"Let's go!" echoed Pat and Tim, hurrying away after Tim had given careful attention to instructions—how to correct for wind-drift, what points to head for. Pat, instructed in what landmarks would be most useful to watch for at night, folded the chart and made sure there was no hole in the side pocket he stored it in as they hurried to the ship.

Off they went, eager and quivering inwardly with the thrill of the great adventure.

"There's your first landmark," Pat spoke gently into the Gossport tube and Tim nodded.

He shifted the nose slightly to the Eastward, and Pat began to watch over the side for the stream they must cross next. He gave his whole mind to his work, feeling that Tim must be free to fix an equally concentrated mind on flying.

They made good time to San Diego's vicinity, but well to the East of it.

"I see a blue light!" Pat forgot to control his tones and Tim was almost startled by the blast of air and loud voice in his ears, but he realized the cause and forgave his brother.

However, he tapped his ears and shook his head. Pat apologized.

Curiously enough, the emergency had brought

the two argumentative brothers to a closer understanding—at least for a time!

"There goes another—they are blue rockets!"

Pat remembered to control his inclination to shout.

Tim, altering the course slightly, added speed by revving up the radial engine.

Closer and closer they drew to the flicker of blue that followed the streaks of fire.

Three miles ahead of them Rodney reached the scene first.

In the time it took them to fly those three miles the exciting event in which Rod took a hand was over.

"There's a small 'plane, away off," Pat told his twin. See! He's firing a blue rocket—down toward the earth, though! By golly-and gracious!" he exclaimed, "blue rockets! Tim, remember in the note, we read it 'rock it' and thought about the sea. It's rocket!"

Tim nodded.

"There goes one up—far to the South."

Tim looked.

Just as Rodney, two scant miles South, was befuddled by the curious lights, first in one direction, then in another, so the twins felt baffled and did not know how to act.

"The little ship is sending out more flashes!"

Tim, nodding, turned and flew toward the light.

By the time he reached the location there were no more of the rockets, from any direction.

Darkness closed down.

Tim began to glide. Pat, excited, warned him.

"There's jagged rocks sticking up all around," he prompted. "Better not go too low!"

Tim took the advice.

With an eye on the fuel supply Tim cruised in high circles, but one important thing he had forgotten. He had never turned on his flying lights!

Rod heard a ship's engine, but could not see the dark-colored wings in the dull sky, he could find no more signals in the dark. His own battery, weak and forgotten, had been jolted by his rough landing on a grassy plateau. Either a wire was snapped or a short circuit had occurred. He could not flash the distress call with his own flying lights.

So close, and yet so far apart, the chums spent the night, two in the air, one on earth beside his damaged ship.

The drone of the engine died from Rod's ears before dawn.

Tim and Pat had discovered something—they were miles to the East when dawn painted the slopes and looked down at a forlorn pilot. By

the time that the rising sun painted the slopes that faced him, and when, finally, Old Sol topped the far, high crests of the cordilleras and looked down into the valleys to the West, he saw a forlorn young pilot beside a Curtiss Jenny with its propeller shattered on the ground and its tail assembly disconsolately pointed toward a far and uncaring sky.

"Sorry, Jenny," Rod, looking at the ship, for all his despondency had to grin. "You look exactly like an ostrich trying to bury its head in the sand!"

He chuckled, a little ruefully.

"I don't see what you've got to be ashamed about," Rod went on. "I was told you'd act up and go crazy; but you behaved like a perfect lady—but I guess it's your pilot you're hiding your head for!"

The old war crate gave no sign.

CHAPTER XVI

"REVENGE"

WHILE the light grew brighter, Rodney stood gazing around him.

Toward the ocean was the cup of the grassy depression between two crests into which his last blue rocket had guided him.

As he swung, to the South, to the North, and at the East of the little depression, rocks—crags—great, forbidding jumbles of Nature's toys blocked escape.

Rodney saw that this was one crack-up from which he came with only the jar and slight bruise of the noseover; yet it was one which did not suit the pilots' expression, "it's a good landing if you can walk away from it!" because he could not "walk away" and get anywhere.

"If I can't get Jenny up again, I'm here to stay," mused Rod.

He put pressure on the light tail, getting the craft onto the tail skid, and gazed with dismay at the propeller.

It was shattered beyond use.

"Flying is over!"

Rodney, already feeling hunger, depression and that terrible desolation of a youth lost in Mexican hills, gave way, for a moment, to real fear.

His common sense could not rescue him. He could not know that the twins were also in the hills, and that both Teddy and the latter's father knew their destination.

There was not the hope of a search and a rescue to drive out that strange terror which comes from the image of starvation, alone, in desolate surroundings. Rod acted like a crazed youth for a time, wasting his strength in vain efforts to piece together the mass of splintered wood that had once drawn the ship through the skies.

He rushed madly about, seeking flat slabs of wood, as though, with sheer superhuman skill he might carve, using his pocket knife, some rude blades to fix in the hub.

In his frenzy he ran with head down, searching the ground for the useless pieces of lumber washed from higher timber by a stream from which he was too frantic to drink.

Full into a man emerging from behind some mesquite brush Rod ran!

"Dios!" ejaculated the man, who had meant to arrest Rod's wild scramble, but who had

hardly expected to be made the target for a butting head, "*Madre de Marie!* Ughmp!"

Rodney, stopped and recoiling, came to himself, his arms caught in a tight grip. The man held him, sputtering and gasping.

"Hio! Hey!" he called, and launched into a stream of Spanish-American dialect.

Rod, lifting his watering eyes and feeling as though he had made a poorly calculated football tackle that added the jar to his neck that completed his total of shocks, saw a squat figure with the dull peon's face set on a short neck, sinister, calculating eyes, powerful, hairy arms. He knew their power from the grip of the stubby hands that pressed his shoulders.

Other men—half a dozen—came from the Eastward side of the cup.

Rod, glad to find himself at least among human beings, with the promise of shelter and food—possibly communication with the world—apologized in halting Spanish.

The men, ignoring him, conferred in excited tones.

One, apparently having either more brain or more authority, gave instructions.

To Rodney's dismay the man held him tighter, while another, stepping behind him, whipped out a soiled apology for a handkerchief

and slapped it across Rod's forehead, over his eyes.

Sweat, and other odors, assailed Rod's nostrils.

Though he struggled, Rod was a child in a chimpanzee's grip.

Protests caused the man behind him to snatch off a bandana from his neck. Transferring the smaller cloth dextrously to Rod's jaws, he took advantage of the mouth opened in remonstrance and jammed in the rag.

The bandana covered his eyes.

Rodney, unable to do more than sputter and gulp, with eyes masked in a dirty, brown blinder, felt one shoulder released and was impelled across the rough declivity that led upward to the base of a rocky outcropping at one side of the cup.

Resistance was futile. Rod realized that.

He submitted quietly enough.

The light, dull brownish and smudged with soiled spots on his bandage, was suddenly dimmed.

They had come into the shadow of the rocks, he reasoned.

"But in which direction? They've led me around, I suppose. I don't see why a flyer in distress has to be treated in this way!"

Rod's thoughts could not be voiced.

The dimmed light faded sharply to dark as he was half pushed and half led forward. Rock rang to the tread of his own and of other feet.

"We're in a cleft," he decided.

A long cleft it was, from the time they took in traversing it.

Light came again!

Still further, on softer turf, on rock, again on turf, they went.

At last a sharp word came from the man who seemed to have authority.

The bandage was dragged roughly aside, and Rod, blinking, stared around him.

Close at hand was the great, charred and smouldering remnant of a huge fire. Around it, on the ground, sat a dozen men, mostly wrapped in the serapes and wearing the hats of the Mexican natives, half-breeds with the darkening of an Indian strain in their blood.

Further away were still others, some cooking frijoles over a smaller blaze, recently kindled; others sat about eating. Many smoked one swiftly, dextrously rolled cigarette after the other.

The crags rose sharply on every side, enclosing the long, curving cleft in what seemed an impassable wall. Yet Rod knew that he had been led into the trap—as it seemed to be.

There was no uncertainty in his mind.

He was in the crevasse called the Lion's Mouth!

Around him was a band that, from looks and situation, could be nothing other than a band of hill brigands—banditry of the roughest order.

Rod lifted his eyes. Restraint seemed to have been removed; his former captors were mingling with their fellows, explaining his presence, no doubt.

Far up at the end, just around a gentle bend of the cliffs, Rod saw something that widened his eyes. He snatched the dirty cloth out of his jaws, rid them of the dreadful taste, raced past the men.

There was no doubt left. He was in the Lion's Mouth—and there, a burned, crushed heap, lay an airplane.

There was not even a bit of fabric left to tell him which ship had come down, whether it had fallen in flames or had been destroyed by the men after its fall.

Swiftly he ran back to the taller man who seemed to be a leader.

"Was anybody in that airplane, *senor?*" he asked eagerly.

"*Si!*" the man nodded, seemingly quite pleasantly.

"Did anybody—escape—get out—of fire?"

The man held up a forefinger and nodded.

"One?"

"*Si!*"

"Can I see him? Where is he?"

A wave of the man's arm, gesturing toward a cave.

Rodney fairly raced to the cave. There, in its mouth, he paused. Only a faint flicker of light from a small fire over which an old woman huddled gave his vision any aid.

As he stood there, looking in, waiting for his pupils to accustom themselves to the dull glow, the woman turned, showing him a creased, witch-like glare of anger. She waved an arm, ordering him to go.

Rod stayed there. He began to discern objects. The cave was quite large, only its front chamber being visible at all; on a tumbled heap or rude bedding lay a form, that began to toss, to moan. Over it a tall, gaunt, slim shape hovered, as though administering some medicine and then rearranged the covers.

Moans, groans, came from the rough couch.

Rod drew closer.

At his approach the doctor, if that was his identity, rose, scowled and then turned aside.

"You'll get little but groans out of this—why, ah—what in the name of?—who are you? Where'd you come from?"

Rodney ignored him. He wanted to see that face under the covers. He must recognize the man he had apparently driven down to a terrible fate. He might be the key to the whole mystery!

Suddenly the doctor bent closer to the man, and as quickly the form on the couch began to throw arms in air, waving, writhing under the stress of some terrible anguish.

"Oh! Oh! Oh! I'm—burning! Burning!—oh!——"

Rod felt cold shudders sweeping through his frame. This was a terrible thing to witness!

"Oh!—Doc—oh!——"

The doctor, crossing to the woman, who seemed undecided about her course of action, snapped in short sentences:

"He won't last long. Nothing to do. Listen. Report what he says!"

Rodney understood enough Spanish of the hybrid, Mexican "breed" idiom to grasp the man's intention.

"Are you going to desert him?" he cried.

The supposed doctor nodded.

"He's done!" he said. "Gave him an opiate! If it's any of your business!" He walked back into the cave, then came out. He had thrown a bundle, probably the man's garments, into a corner. Rod hesitated. He thought of detain-

ing the medico by force; then what he heard from the couch made him forget the other man entirely.

"Oh!—" the last moan was shrill, blood-chilling.

Then, as though becoming sane and painless for a brief interval, the sufferer cried out coherently, but in shrill, carrying tones:

"I'm a goner—but I got El—lis!"

Rod ran closer. The old woman caught his arm in talons of steel, dragging at him.

"*Santissima!*" she screamed. "Come away! Let be!"

Rod stood his ground, bracing against her dragging, clawlike hands.

"I got El—lis!" the voice from the couch screeched. "Joe al—al—ways—get—gets—re—re—venge!——"

The voice trailed off to silence on the last word.

"'I got Ellis. Joe always gets revenge!'" Rod felt those words burn into his brain.

Joe! But *he* had gone from Los Angeles in the liner. Or—hadn't he?

Had he, instead, been supplanted? Had he, reckless, infuriated, seeing an opportunity, secured some other aircraft, gone aloft, lured the Oakland Queen away, led her here, tried to drive her down?

There came a shrill howl from the couch. Rod's blood turned to ice.

Then there was silence. The woman released Rod, went to the bed, bent low, and rose—her fingers, in the dim glow, caressed a rosary. Her lips muttered an "Ave!" Rod, knowing it meant the end, went out sadly. "Joe—revenged? He, not the Oakland Queen, fell! Poor Joe!"

Walking out into the bright sunshine that by then came over the lip of the Eastern ridge, Rodney stood for a moment looking around.

"Where did that American fellow go?" he mused.

If there was one cave, he reasoned, there might be others.

He wanted to see the white man, to ask him questions, to get away as soon as possible. The thought of being held there did not occur to him. As a hostage he had no value!

His eyes, questing up the narrow gash with its slight curve, caught the glint of the sun's beams on glistening strands of copper led over four crosspieces, supported by a stanchion set high up on the face of the cliff on a ledge.

"There's an aerial," he murmured. "A directional loop. That's where the note meant that the 'A' on one loop, with no 'T' or 'N' was to come from. But Joe—" his face saddened in spite of the wickedness of Joe's attempted

vengeance, "—but Joe either spoiled the plans made by others, or took the matter into his own hands and tried to drive down the ship. But he failed, and he has paid the price, himself!"

His thought returned to the aerial.

"They must use that to lure airplanes where they can wreck them for their cargoes," he surmised. "Well,—with a modern loop antenna and an American—a renegade—at the head of this band, if I can't argue him into letting me go I can get a chance to send out a call for help."

He knew how to find the American—if he was not too closely restrained by guards.

An aerial meant a "lead-in" wire to a set, also a "ground" from the set.

If he was given freedom of action, he would trace them. They would lead him to the American bandit chief.

He moved off toward the distant cliff, murmuring:

"Poor Joe—he's learned what revenge costs!"

CHAPTER XVII

"BEARS!"

UNAWARE of Rod's experiences, having reached the scene too late to discern any details, Tim and Pat, in the high-wing Express, cruised for awhile. With an eye on his gas gauge Tim began to edge away from the more dangerous zone of crag and jagged, out-flung fangs.

"I thought I saw a ship go down, on fire," Pat told him through his tube.

"So did I!" Tim nodded in agreement.

They cruised, pretty high, while Pat peered down on every side.

Finally, when dawn was close, he sighted something.

"I think I see wings—yes—and a big ship!" he informed his brother. "There has been a crack-up—or else that's a valley safe for a landing."

Evidently their flying lights were discerned, or the sound of their engine had been heard. From the liner, or whatever the big shape was,

an underbody landing light glowed on the ground, flashing on and off.

"They're spelling—'S—O—S,'" Pat read for Tim.

Soon, as they circled and dipped lower, landing flares revealed to them a good-sized plateau, lying probably a quarter of a mile East of the smaller saucer Rod had found. Tim, discerning the familiar lines of the real Oakland Queen in the blaze of landing lights, made a good landing.

Dawn slid its gray promise of light over the hills.

The first person to greet them as they leaped out of the high-wing was Rodney's father.

"Hello!" He showed great surprise. "You two? Where is Rod? How did you happen to come here?" He listened to their explanations.

If Rodney had been there at the moment, in that growing daylight, his eyes would have been wide open, indeed.

Even Pat and Tim, unaware of Rod's experience, were disconcerted.

Coming to greet them, hand extended, a grin on his usually sullen face—was Joe.

"Hello!" he called. "Well, how'd you get away from field five?"

"How did—you?"

Joe grinned at Tim.

"Don't hold a grouch!" he urged. "Be like me. After I got discharged by boss Ellis, I vowed I'd get revenge. Well, I have! But not by being as bad as you think. I got a bigger revenge! I 'heaped coals of fire on his head!'"

"Oh! Is that so?"

"It is, Tim," Mr. Ellis spoke up. "Joe 'got back at me' with a vengeance. At least, he tried to."

"Yes, sir," Tim retorted. "He picked up a radio message, about you, and then deserted the Oakland Queen, Joe did——"

"Oh. Do you know about the message?" The designer and builder of airplanes smiled. "That message seems to have created a great deal of excitement—if you allude to the one I have in mind."

"'Ellis is the one,'" began Pat.

"That is it." The designer smiled. "How did you get hold of it?"

"We found the pad Joe—or Nelse—had written a copy on, put graphite in the pencil dents——"

Joe turned admiringly to Tim, who scowled.

"Clever, at that!" Joe commended them.

"Joe got that message," stated Mr. Ellis, and then sprang a surprise.

"From whom did you think it came?"

"We didn't know, Mr. Ellis," responded Tim,

"but we knew it mixed you in with something that looked—very bad! We belong to Rod's Sky Scouts, and we have been trying to overtake you and tell you what has gone wrong in your plans and try to get you not to do anything you'd be—sorry for."

"Very commendable, indeed. As fine as the idea of Rod's organization. He will make something of that idea! But—like Joe, you probably misunderstood the words on the air."

"How, sir? You mean, taking 'rocket' to be 'rock it' and?——"

"I—sent—that—message!"

"You—Mr. Ellis?"

"But—" Pat interrupted his brother, to be interrupted, in turn.

"Just let me explain," urged the designer. "Do you see that tall, cold-eyed gentleman, coming from among those silk-hatted men in frock coats?" They nodded. He went on, "That, my Sky Scouts, is Mr. Leonard Stedman."

They stared, not sensing what he meant.

"Take his initials!"

"Leonard Stedman—L. S." Pat said. "Mr. Ellis. L. S. and El-lis, over a poor set of headphones, might sound the same, nearly."

"That fooled Joe," explained the airplane builder. "I thought my business was being ruined by some schemers. Henry thought like-

wise. We suspected Joe, Nelse, and others—especially Mr. Leonard Stedman, whose initials we always used. Joe, picking up my message——"

"Excuse me, please, sir," Tim broke in. "Why is 'L. S.' here, then?"

"Because, like Joe, he has vindicated himself, removed all chance for suspicion. Joe, for his part, as soon as he caught that call, and thought it was 'about' me instead of 'from' me, slipped away and got hold of my hangar manager by telephone. He gave the manager the call as he understood it, and the manager, using the radio at the plant, to call me in the Express high-wing, relayed it. I picked up Joe.

"Then, although I suspected Stedman and he suspected me, I planned with Joe to be present on this ship and fly it into the danger zone we suspected Stedman of having prepared—in the Lion's Mouth!"

"But—he's with you!" repeated Pat, dazed.

"Yes. You see, he picked up that message. See if you understand it better from my own interpretation: 'I think . . . L. S. is the one.' You were right, Hank. He will follow 'A'—one loop! No. 'T' or 'N.' You had the right theory. He plans to get that Billion Dollar crowd out of the way, then force down their stock, and let the bears clean them up. Better repeat your

plan, Hank. Come in! On field eleven, deadstick, stall down. On blue rocket we will come and divide—'the third party'—Hawkins, that was—'flies East, you go South'—in the substitute Queen, continuing the course—'I go into the Lion's Mouth' of course with the men Henry was to get, in the real Oakland Queen."

"It is clear enough," agreed Tim, "not at all the way we read it. But what do you mean by 'bears'?"

"Don't you know?"

"No, sir." Pat was puzzled. "Nor why you say 'stock.' We read it 'stork,' same as we read 'Hawk' for Hank, and 'rock it'——"

Mr. Ellis smiled at Stedman, who returned a twisted, cold-eyed sort of response.

"They aren't 'taking flyers' in Wall Street yet, I'm glad to say," he remarked. Mr. Ellis shook his head.

"It's well they aren't getting the general craze for stock 'gambling' under the disguise of 'investing' or 'playing the market,'" he said.

"I don't understand at all!" declared Pat.

"Have you never heard—or read—about the Wall Street 'bulls' who send the price of securities higher by heavy buying? And 'bears' who drive stocks lower in price by selling heavily?"

"Oh! Yes!" Tim saw light. "Corporation securities—stocks!"

That was it, Mr. Ellis agreed, and explained for Pat's benefit that certificates were issued to those investing in the stock of a corporation, and that such "stocks" were "traded," bought and sold, in exchange centers such as Wall Street's Stock Exchange. That center, with other cities, formed the marketing place for securities.

Tim grasped the situation at once; but Pat had not paid much attention to "Wall Street" and "bulls" and "crashes."

"You see," Mr. Stedman explained, "if you owned a thousand dollar investment in my transport company, you would get a certificate to show that you had invested. If you needed money suddenly you might want to sell that certificate. But you'd have a hard time finding the one person in America who would want that amount of stock, at that time, and at a price you could accept."

"Therefore, stock 'exchanges' are operated," Mr. Ellis took up the explanation. "You can notify a member of such a central bureau that you wish him to sell your thousand dollar certificate, let me say, at a profit of two dollars—and if some one else will pay that extra two, the sale is effected for you. But if the company

has lost money, and the certificate is not worth so much, you may have to dispose of it at a loss —of whatever the bureau or exchange quotation is at that time."

"I know!" Tim broke in, and turned to his brother, "Pat," he said, "you know—people have made a business of 'trading' in those stocks in big quantities. If they offer to buy, raise the price, and send the 'market' upward, they are 'bulls.' If they throw lots of stock on the market at less than the regular price at the time, and scare people into selling at a loss, they are called——"

Pat's eyes widened.

"Bears!" he exclaimed.

Amazed, he turned to the smiling designer.

"Are those the sort of 'bears' somebody you meant to turn loose?"

"Yes, Pat!"

"If you didn't plan to—and Mr. 'L. S.' didn't —who did?"

"That," said Mr. Ellis sternly, "that is what the Billion Dollar crowd would like to know!"

CHAPTER XVIII

"ALL'S WELL!"

WATCHING Tim and Pat with his penetrating, cold eyes, Mr. Leonard Stedman turned to the designer.

"These youngsters seem to think they know who is at the bottom of our mysteries," he stated, clipping his words and frowning.

"Well—" Tim spoke sharply but not angrily, "you could be the one, if it comes to that, sir."

"So could any of us," one of the others, listening interestedly, remarked. "Any one of us could, son. Just what makes you concentrate on Leonard Stedman?"

"He was in a terrible hurry to get the Oakland Queen delivered," Tim gave his evidence, "he threatened to cancel the contract when Mr. Ellis delayed delivery to test and change some more." Mr. Ellis nodded and several men favored Stedman with deep attention.

"When Henry brought the ship in, the way I understand it," continued Tim, "he told what had happened. But Mr. Stedman didn't delay

the proposed flight!" He said it deliberately, "He hurried it!"

He paused, to make his next statement emphatic.

"The weather board showed poor visibility and mist, traveling in from the sea and heavier toward the South—but—clear weather today!"

"You think I hurried the take off to get full advantage of the poor flying weather?——"

It looked very much like it, one of the others declared. Another, sneering a little, remarked: "It certainly showed a lot of consideration for us and for our safety."

"It doesn't occur to you," snapped the suspected man, "that I had a strong conviction that Ellis was behind some unworthy plan! You don't see that I wanted to get away before he could arrive—he was an invited guest, you may recall." He gave his next words an emphasis equal to Tim's last statement.

"Your reason is at fault, gentlemen. Remember—I came along! Is that a likely thing if I meant to maroon you? How am I in a position to force down stock and let the bears destroy anyone's prestige?"

"Through some confederate in New York!" snapped a tall, gaunt man.

"Very well, sir," the accused man looked at

them with a glint of steel in his eyes, "the matter can easily be settled."

"How, sir?"

Pat and Tim listened eagerly for the reply.

"We will take off at once," said Stedman. "We will fly back to Oakland at once. That will enable each of you to protect individual interests—and enable me to wash my hands," he was sarcastic, "of a thankless task: trying to protect your lives against Ellis and his gang!"

"I'd rather trust him than you!" cried Tim.

"Easy!" counseled Joe, laying a hand on the shoulder of the impetuous youth. "Let the older folks fight this out, Buddy!"

There was no quarrel.

Somewhat to Tim's surprise, and to Pat's amazement, Mr. Ellis merely smiled, turned on his heel, walked toward the ship.

"You do wisely, Stedman, to cancel the flight!"

Joe nudged Tim.

"You two come on with me. I want to look over the Express crate. After an amateur has handled it, I'd better see if all is right before you hop back across these rocks."

They walked with him toward the smaller airplane.

"There's only a gallon or two of gas left, and

the oil is low," Tim said. "I don't see how we can fly back!"

"We can borrow enough from the Queen. Start her up, Pat—give that propeller a twist. I'll sit in the cockpit——"

"No you don't!" Tim got between him and the small fuselage. "When this 'bus goes aloft, Pat and I do the flying. You don't get away as easily as all that, Mister Compass-Fixer!"

Joe drew back.

"With a gallon of gas?" he scoffed.

"Yes," Pat sided with his brother. "It would take you to—the Lion's Mouth! You could get your friends—whoever you were trying to locate when you sent out those rockets we saw!"

Joe scowled, looked almost ferocious, but clamped his jaws and did not answer for a moment: when he had recovered his self-control he laughed, gruffly.

"If you think you could fit in a compass, that diverted us out to sea, with a scheme to take the ship inland, and if you want to suspect everybody, go ahead."

"Well, who was flying the ship?"

"When we came down here? Mr. Stedman was."

"What were you doing?"

"Getting out the rockets; but they were to signal to Henry—in the other ship." Joe looked

disgustedly at Tim. "Why don't you suspect Henry? He was to meet us with the substitute ship, and some men, but he wasn't near when we set down—the time you were in the tail. He is the one! He lured us down here, by dropping blue rockets while we chased him! Then, as soon as he got us where he wanted us, he managed to get above us while we were thinking he was leading the way to a landing. Then he tried to force us down."

He made one more speech, bitter and sarcastic.

"You don't suspect him—any more than the boss or Ellis does!"

"You'll see that he had good reason for not showing up—" Pat began his defence of the absent mechanician, but paused. Henry could have done that luring, that maneuvering. It was a new idea! Both he and Tim had ignored the mechanician's part, because he had been one of the Ellis employes and was supposedly trustworthy.

"Oh, well!" Joe scowled, starting to walk away. "As long as you suspect me—here's something I caught when it flew through the air, as the Queen did her circusing stunt. I don't want anything that belongs to either of you!"

He snatched a small, round brass case from

his pocket and flipped it at Pat. Tim, more agile, caught it before it struck earth.

"Your compass has come back to you," he said to his twin. "Now—Pat, while those frock-coated, silk-hatted gentlemen are strolling around, let's you and I slip around and make sure this is the real Oakland Queen—that ship has the 'coop' forward; but the other hasn't!"

They wandered, apparently aimlessly, around the large airplane.

Seeing his chance, Tim caught a brace, swung onto a tire, got up on the low catwalk, and was quickly forward. His brother saw, as he slipped within the enclosure back of the center engine, that this was the real Oakland Queen. Tim was in the "coop."

Pat, seeing no one particularly observing him, as the men walked about, discussing affairs, perhaps of international importance, got into the cabin and moved on to the pilots' compartment. He compared his small compass with the larger one.

They agreed.

Then his eyes opened, his hand shook, his jaw dropped.

The ship's compass needle moved aside several points—and clung there without a quiver!

Pat leaped out. To his amazement, Tim came dashing to join him.

Pat got no chance to speak of the compass.

"Listen!" Tim gasped, "I was in the 'coop,' and I looked around. I spotted some wires that looked out of place, and traced them. Pat—there's a radio receiver in there—and I caught a call from Nelse! He's just been on the air! I picked it up. He has the duplicate ship—in Mexico City. He must have been talking to Mr. Hawkins. He was saying, when I tuned in, 'I got suspicious of Joe and of Henry, and I found a document that incriminated Joe—I was chased by Henry, but I got away!'"

"Is that all?" Pat forgot his own discovery in this new revelation.

"No! Then he said, 'I got to field eleven, where the message said the gang was to meet, and told the pilot I was to take Henry's place in this other ship. He let me take it. I flew down—and either Joe or Henry had gotten another ship. I tried to contact the Queen, but I missed her, so I flew on to Mexico City, with the duplicate liner and some men picked up in San Diego, to pretend they are the rich lads.'

"So, you see, Nelse is all right, but I don't know about Joe."

"Tell you what!" Pat suggested, "tell everybody! Tell them what you've heard! Watch and see who looks guilty!"

" 'Sky Scouts to the rescue!' " quoted Tim. "I will!"

He shouted and the crowd assembled.

Excitedly he related his message. There was exclaiming and much debate. Mr. Ellis was for getting aloft and meeting Nelse. Mr. Stedman was bound to return with their passengers to Los Angeles. Joe kept very quiet. However, the trio immediately began to start up the engines, debating their respective plans.

"Nobody looked guilty!" Tim asserted, moving away with Pat. "Let's see how much gas we'll need in the Express—before they get the Queen warmed up and get off."

They moved to the smaller craft. Standing by as Tim examined the tank to judge its capacity, Pat called excitedly:

"Tim! Look! Up there—on that peak! Isn't that the flash of a mirror? Is somebody signaling?"

Somebody was! And Joe, at the port propeller, was calling for all to hear. "Contact!" shouted the assistant pilot.

CHAPTER XIX

ROD GETS SOME FACTS

WITH his eyes fixed on the shimmering copper wire, braided and fixed on its frame, Rodney discarded at once his first surmise that the bandits in the Lion's maw used the antenna—and radio it led to—for luring airplanes to destruction. must be wrong. 'Planes were too few in Mexico.

They probably had some other use for it.

What that use was Rod did not bother to consider further.

A loop antenna signified a receiving set and perhaps a sending set.

That spelled contact with the outside world.

"I can get help!" Rod muttered. He gave a swift glance around the narrow, curved crevasse. The men who had brought him in through some cleverly concealed passageway between, or under the crags, seemed not to pay any attention to him.

"They know I can't find the way out," he decided. "I've got all the freedom there is. I wonder——"

He walked toward the rocks where, in a base high above his head, the stanchion supporting the antenna was fixed.

"I wonder—if I can trace the lead-in wire, and get to the set," he half whispered.

Down the side of the rocks he saw the line of insulated cable coming from the aerial; glass-knobbed insulators showed a workmanlike set-up. That did not at all fit in with the type of man he had seen giving orders. No Mexican half-breed with a cruel face and twisted lips was capable of assembling a connection with the neatness Rod observed in insulation, joining of splices, wrapping of waterproof tape around those splices, and cleverly planted stake of iron to which the ground wire was attached.

"The lead-in goes there—and the ground comes out—there!"

He faced a narrow fissure between the rock ribs, where some gigantic upheaval had split the rock in times long past. Into the crevice, not wider than three feet, was fitted a stout door.

In channels chiseled through the rock at one side the wires led in and out, untouched by the moving part of the closed door.

"Nobody seems to care whether I explore or not," Rod murmured. "Either they are mighty dumb bandits or—or they don't suppose I know anything about radios."

He put up a hand, hesitatingly, against the door edge.

"I wonder what I'll find beyond this door!"

He squared his shoulders, assured himself that no one made any move to stop him, that the men were idling around the ashes of the night bonfire, and pushed on the door.

It gave readily.

Beyond it, as he walked resolutely forward, Rod saw a passage that ran in under the spot where the break ended. Evidently an artificial excavation, at great cost of labor and time, had been made beyond the natural "hallway."

Forward, rather hopeful, somewhat anxious, Rod moved.

At the entrance to the artificial cavern Rod paused. Then he saw that a light burned dimly in a corner.

"Come on in," a deep, rather gruff voice spoke out of the depths. "I've been expecting you, Rodney Ellis!" It was the "doc" who spoke.

Rod started, staring with eyes not yet taking in the details of a figure that straightened and turned in an old chair set before some knobs, dials and a bakelite board that refracted glints from the small portable battery lamp burning over its panels.

Who was the man addressing him by name?

Rodney got over his start of amazement, advanced, got close enough to see.

"I—I don't know how you can call my name," he stammered. "I never saw you before today, Mister——"

"It's simple enough," the man responded. "An airplane designer put some juice into his radio-telephone set, calling the Oakland Queen, early yesterday morning. I listened. He told Hank that L. S. was the one he suspected of planning to play a clever game with Wall Street bears against the Billion Dollar crowd about to be taken on the first good-will flight down the coast, through Mexico, into Central America, and back through Texas."

The man certainly had plenty of information, Rod discovered.

From that message, and others sent out, later, from people on the air liner, and others, trying to make contact, the man added, it was no difficult task for a person with some brains to learn that some young person—from his sending, an amateur—was trying to get the Oakland Queen, then calling a lad known as Tim in the Ellis Express high-wing, and, failing that, asked some other 'op' if he had any news of Rodney Ellis, flying a Curtiss war-time Jenny.

"A Curtiss Jenny stuck its nose into the sod,"

the man concluded. "A young lad ran wild until my men brought him in. Simple, eh?"

"You got it through the set," agreed Rodney. "Can you tell me anything about my father?"

The man could—and did.

As he laid the facts before Rodney, all that had occurred came into sharp, clean-cut focus.

Mr. Ellis, after the Oakland Queen had taken off for its ferrying flight to Oakland, he said, had sent out a radio message to some ship being tested. He told its pilot to fly it to field eleven. There he was to turn it over to "Hank"—"Evidently your father's name for his prize mechanician," the man broke his narrative to say—"Hank was to put a stop to some dreadful scheme. Hank, later on, made contact with your father, in his Express speed 'bus, and I gather it has a receiver but no sending apparatus, because Hank reported but got no answer."

Eagerly Rodney told him that the surmise was correct.

"You know a whole lot!" he said meaningly.

The man calling himself Ren laughed.

"Pick a lot out of the air," he said, and then, after a moment of indecision he seemed to determine to talk more freely.

"I don't mind telling you, Rodney Ellis," he said, while the young pilot listened with every

faculty straining to catch meanings, hidden or discovered.

"I don't mind telling you that there's a lot behind your puzzles, Buddy, that doesn't meet the eye. Would you like a few facts?"

"I certainly would!"

"Here they are." Ren smiled. "A fellow called Joe came down here, a while back, and made some arrangements. I agreed to them because—well, for good, and sufficient reasons."

Rodney stared. So it was Joe who had made the original plan to run off with the ship!

Rodney merely nodded, afraid to lose a word by speaking himself.

"At any rate, whatever I'm to get out of it—the idea was for Joe to manage it so the big airplane would have to come down somewhere close to these gorges. His part was to get the Billion Dollar crowd down here. Mine is—to keep them."

"And mine," Rodney glanced away to conceal the thought that he did not dare to voice, "mine is—to get them away!"

"What do you expect to get? Ransom?" he asked when Ren paused, evidently expecting some sort of response.

"Promotion — prestige — and profit!" Ren chuckled.

After a moment he went on disclosing his "facts."

"Your father meant to out-trick the trickster," he explained. "The idea was, last night, for Henry to join a ship that wouldn't be unlike the Oakland Queen in general lines. Then he and some men he would hire, must 'dope' and lacquer it up exactly like the other—the real Queen. After that, as soon as he could, your father would meet Henry and there would be a general exchange of passengers."

The man certainly knew his father's plans, Rodney concluded.

"The rich men would be put in Henry's duplicate of the Oakland Queen, because that ship wasn't known, being new, below the cities she had already flown through. In Mexico, and on, beyond, any ship would do. All your father wanted was to continue the scheduled and advertised flight with the genuine money men. In the meanwhile, he would send a couple of them on, in another ship, supposed to be flown under the command of a friend known as Hawkins, to New York, to foil some of the schemes of the unknown gang that plotted against your dad."

"What were those schemes?"

"To spread news rumors about the lost millionaires, so that Wall Street stocks would go down—the 'bears' would help."

"So that was what the message meant!" Rod exclaimed.

Ren, who appeared to understand just what message Rod meant, nodded.

"Exactly!" He manipulated several switches on the radio panel, used the headset a moment, put it down and continued his disclosures.

"Oddly enough, Rodney, that message was—sent by—your own dad."

"But it said 'Ellis is the one'!"

"Yes. But—L. S.——"

"Wait!" Rod interrupted; and in the same way that his chums had been enlightened not so many minutes before, on an outer plateau, Rodney secured the information that cleared his father and implicated Leonard Stedman.

"That makes a lot of difference," Rodney explained. "Now, maybe you can tell me about 'a-one loop—no. t n.'"

"You know how radio beacons operate?"

"Glory-to-grandma! I never thought of that! Yes! They have two separated, directional aerials, and on one they keep sending out the dot-dash of Morse code 'A.'" Rodney was enlightened. "On the other, the opposite code signal, dot-dash 'N' goes over the air. That makes a sort of double channel, with dot-dash at the left side and dash-dot at the right."

A pilot, flying a course toward the beacon,

tuning in his receiving set, would pick up the strong dot-dash, or dash-dot, if he happened to be to the left or right of his proper course.

"In the airline to the beacon," Rod finished, "he would get both signals with equal strength, and so the dot-dash, and the dash-dot, blending, would make the long-dash of Morse code 'T.'"

"Just it!" agreed Ren. "And so, if a pilot caught 'A' and veered to pick up the other signal, and didn't find it, he'd either think his set was out of order or that he was getting some 'trick air wave, like a mirage that shows a lake to a thirsty man in a desert where there never was any lake."

"I see!" Rod exclaimed. "You were going to—to send out 'A' on your radio without any other set going, and Joe would use that to follow down to the Lion's Mouth."

He saw, at once, why the compass had been altered. With the weather foggy, with poor visibility, with Stedman hurrying the start of the flight, everything seemed to snap into place.

A fog, poor visibility, high flying, no landmarks, a compass that could not be trusted—all those factors would make it wise to pick up a radio beacon for guidance. Joe could say he was getting the one in almost any locality within range, and set the course by that—and yet be catching really the "A" from the gorge.

The directional aerial loop made it possible for him to steer close enough by that one signal to get the Queen to a place where she could be driven down.

"Joe must have been waiting around to help in that other 'bus!" Rod said. "Now, where is the Oakland Queen, Mr.—er—Ren?"

"About half a mile due South-East of us."

"Then—I can see my father!" Rod turned, eager and impatient.

"Oh, yes! But don't trouble to hunt him up," Ren was a little bit sarcastic, "I'll have him brought in to you."

"But—look here, Mr. Ren! You can't expect to 'get away with it!' The American Government will cooperate with the Mexican——"

"See here! Don't try to dictate my business! I've told you all this because it amuses me to talk to somebody in American. But you stay here, where you can't interfere with my plans, until I'm sure of my—promotion, prestige and profit!"

Rod's eyes strayed involuntarily toward the radio.

Ren laughed, a little bruskly, harshly.

"If you can operate that set," he said, rising, "welcome. Hop to it, Buddy!"

Rod realized that there must be some electri-

cal trick in its workings that he could not know; but he concealed his disappointment.

"Is Joe the ringleader in the scheme against Dad and the rich men?"

"I think there's a 'man—higher up.'"

"Who?"

"Well—all Joe has told me, so far, is that 'he's' an old-time pilot who still uses the war days expressions—'contact' and 'coupe!' where you might say 'switch on' and 'switch off, gas on!'"

A lieutenant came hurrying in, crying in excited and garbled Mex'-Spanish that the man on guard on the peaks had flashed news.

Ren dashed out to the gorge, closely followed by Rodney.

He caught a mirror from a lieutenant; signal flashes leaped to and fro, from peak to gorge and from gorge to peak. Rod read their import.

Surrounded, the air liner's passengers were to be caught—before they could get up and away!

But Rod did not stay to see and read more.

"If I can work that radio!—" he muttered as he ran.

CHAPTER XX

UP AND AWAY!

GREAT excitement was caused among the millionaires by the news that Nelse had been able to get the duplicate airplane in which to carry on the plan originated by Mr. Ellis.

Totally unaware that sharp eyes watched from concealment behind rocks, brush and stunted mountain trees, the "rich" men argued among themselves.

Pat turned to his brother.

"How does Nelse expect to help by flying on the plotted course?"

"There goes the bread-basket working its brains instead of letting the head do its own work," Tim sneered. "Pat, don't you see? If the ship sets down in Mexico City, there won't be any reports that the big liner is delayed and if the fellows Henry picked can keep quiet and act as though they had money, nobody in Mexico will guess that the men aren't the Billion Dollar passenger list—and that will give Mr. Ellis time to get to some place where they can meet

and then the Oakland Queen will go on as though nothing had happened!"

"Bully!" Pat ignored the original slur on his mental capacity. He was used to it. "We'd better get some gas before they——"

"What's the matter?"

Pat, turning, gaped, staring up toward a high crag.

"Look!" he gasped.

Tim saw the flash of sunlight on some bright object—once—twice—quickly!

"Heliograph!" he said sharply.

"What did it spell, then?"

"Sh-h-h! 'A-t-t-a-c-k a-t o-n-c-e!'"

"Mr. Ellis! Mr. Stedman! Look out!" Tim was racing across the grass.

"Get to the ship!" he shouted over his shoulder.

The men were astonished.

Had he gone crazy?

Tim was running toward the smaller airplane.

"Pat—come on—run!" he screeched, pulling his plump twin along.

"Here, come back! What?——"

"Look out! Get to the ship!" Tim screamed back over his shoulder. "Pat—get a move on. We must get the the little 'bus before they——"

Pat saw, at last, what was happening.

Tim, snatching side glances, saw also. His

whole effort was to reach the Express high-wing.

Men—a dozen of them, armed—with knives glinting, with revolvers flashing back the glare of the morning sun, now rising higher—came from concealment.

Pat saw, as the men rushed, shouting toward the larger airplane, that Tim's race was against being cut off from their own little ship.

"I'm—huh—hurry—ing!" Pat panted as Tim urged him to greater effort.

Between the larger ship and the millionaires, as Tim caught a glimpse by a quick look back, half a dozen of the banditry had already secured places.

The millionaires were cut off.

They stood rather stupefied and helpless, unarmed as they were.

"Get to the prop! Get to the prop," Tim urged.

Pat stumbled over a small boulder.

"Umgph!" he grunted, going down. Pat picked himself up. A man cut across the grass, caught Tim by the arm.

A second, close behind, was ready as Pat got to his feet.

There was a great shouting around the larger airplane. Men of the attacking party, discharging their revolvers in the air, menaced the men

who stood, huddled and rather impotent before them.

Suddenly the engines, turning idly before that, revved up.

There were no chocks under the wheels; brakes held the tires stationary.

"They'd get away." Tim forgot his own plight and Pat's in his eagerness to see the rich men escape. "They'd get free if only some one of them would lead a football rush against those fellows."

As though thinking the same thing one of the taller, lean men of the passengers gave a shout and calling his companions to attack, went at the bandits head down.

Tim, standing spellbound, saw an amazing thing.

The air liner was not waiting for the passengers! Released brakes and speeding propellers enabled it to begin to move.

"They mean to run down the bandits!" gasped Tim, and Pat echoed his hurrah!

"No—what in the world?—" Pat changed his mind.

Stunned, he saw the practically empty air liner begin to race at greater speed toward the bandits.

They scattered, to right and to left.

Tim saw his chance.

The liner was coming toward them!

With a swift smash of his doubled fist against the elbow of the man who held Pat, causing the blow on the man's "funnybone" to make his nerves and muscles snap in the shock, Tim caused Pat to be released.

Instantly, tripping his own captor, he wrenched free.

"Pat—quick!"

Pat saw the danger.

The air liner, gathering speed, scattering brigands and millionaires alike, was bearing down on their lighter ship.

Who was at the controls? Would he swerve?

Tim dared not take the chance.

Someone—he could not take time to recognize who was still on the ground—but someone in the air liner was deserting, leaving the rest!

The only chance there was of keeping the air liner in sight lay in Tim's hands.

He caught up the tail of the light ship and ran, tugging, aside from the path of the approaching monster of the skies.

As it came closer the wheels rose.

"Quick!" Tim panted, "Pat—before the men recover!"

Pat, still puffing, was at the propeller. Tim, careful, but quick, got to the controls.

"Switch off—gas on!" panted Pat.

"Switch off! Gas on!"

A man had stopped rubbing his chin. With fury in his glittering Mexican half-breed's jet eyes and his mouth working with pain and hatred, he started toward the youths.

Pat turned the propeller, sucking in gas.

"Gas off, switch on!" gasped Pat.

"Gas——"

Without an instant of further delay, as Pat leaped back, Tim sent the current into the firing plugs.

The engine caught, sputtered, settled, under Tim's alert nursing, into a steady roar.

The whirl of the propeller threw leaves and dirt back into the eyes of the man who was coming to grab Pat.

Tim cut down the fuel. The engine could not be warmed any more.

"Pat—in with you!"

Pat reached the side of the small craft, fairly scrambled into the seat.

A race—a man's long arm shot out and clutched at his shoulder.

Pat threw his body aside, crouched low.

Tim accelerated the engine.

With fingers gripping like talons at his coat, Pat felt the scrape—futile but close—of the nails on cloth.

Tim revved up suddenly.

The wind caught the man's mouth agape—sent him staggering as a swerve of the ship rolled the advancing fuselage against Pat's captor.

The fingers spread wide, flew into the air—the man staggered back and the small ship, free, raced down the field—rose—up and away!

Tim, glancing down, saw the millionaires, the bandits, staring up.

He saw a tiny hole appear in the wing.

The roar of the engine drowned the shot.

With breath coming in quick gasps he steadied his nerves, got a good grip on the stick, and opened the throttle all the way.

A glance back showed him Pat, white but firm, snapping on the two parts of his webbed safety belt.

"We'll follow!" shouted Tim, but Pat could not hear.

They had not donned helmets, put cotton in their ears. The roar of the motor deafened them.

But they were safe—and free to follow the vanishing air liner!

CHAPTER XXI

ANOTHER KIND OF FLIGHT

Rodney, in the small cavern used by Ren as a radio room and private quarters, felt helpless and baffled.

He knew that the attack on the air liner and her passengers—and if Ren told the truth, on his father—might be launched at any instant, as soon as the man on the peak with the mirror could give his full instructions.

Rod was in a strange room, facing a radio set he did not understand.

Besides, the battery storage lamp was almost out, burning dimly red as its battery continually grew weaker.

Rod did not know where the new cells were to be found.

As he stood before the set, feeling that much depended on him and realizing how futile would be any effort he could make, he thought he heard a queer sound, like the crunch of heavy stone against larger masses of rock.

A landslide! That was his first thought.

The sound was not repeated.

Rodney hesitated. He did not know which dials of the set he saw only dimly were for the receiving apparatus, which were for the sender. The switches, tuning units and other attachments on the panel did not shape up as did those on the commercially built sets he had seen.

He knew Morse, knew something about the technique of sending out radio messages and radio-telephone communications; but all his experience had been with receiving sets, not with the other end of the ether-communications.

He was about to risk turning on a switch.

He heard that low, grinding and grating sound, rock on rock, again!

Temporarily baffled by his helplessness, Rod's acute wits snapped into their customary alertness with the repetition.

That was rock being moved—by some human hand!

"A door—in the rock!"

As Rod whispered the conclusion softly, he faded into the darkness of the corner under the radio table.

There was almost no light, except the indirect gleam of the sun's reflection from the rock floor at the entrance.

That was enough.

In it a shadowy silhouette cut across Rod's line of view—two stout legs encased in chaps—

a Mexican bandit, seen from the place under the table, would look like that, Rod decided.

The man was hurrying out.

He had not come in!

Rod waited only long enough to let the man get into the sunlight; there he would not be able to see back into the dark room.

There must be a movable part of the rock wall. The man had come from the darkness beyond the radio table, walking straight along.

Rod located the place. His exploring fingers felt the crack of the ridge where the movable rock and the solid sills contacted. With hard, eager pushes he tried to move the rock. It did not budge.

He thought of secret panels told about in detective stories.

The panel, even of rock, must operate with a lever, and be set on a pivot. He had heard the opening and the closing of the stone, Rod reasoned. If one could operate it, given time another should be able to discover its secret.

The secret was not so hard to learn. Evidently sure of its safety in his own quarters and under his eye, the man calling himself Ren did not have his levers concealed. Only the darkness hid the mechanism from immediate detection; but darkness was perhaps better than any more elaborate method of hiding. Rod, with his

fingers running along the stones felt a long iron bar, standing upright in a small cutting. He tried to pull it toward him. It did not move.

Breathless, he paused.

The embrasure, his fingers told him in the dark, was wider than the space needed for getting a grip on its unfinished, rough tip. That might mean something.

"It moves sidewise," he concluded.

He tried the lever. There came the crunch of the moving stone and a smell of dampness and stale mold.

Rod felt around. A space about two feet wide and higher than his head was thus revealed to him in the blackness. Wriggling through, without troubling to open the gateway fully, Rod was in an equally dark place. He felt on the rocky side of the wall, found a duplicate lever and by touch knew that it was in the same position that he had left its mate.

He restored it, with some difficulty, to its normal, upright place.

The door was closed.

"If nobody heard it!—" he muttered, and began to feel his way along the wall, not knowing whether he was to be pursued or not, having no idea of the direction he traveled, where he would end up, or what pitfalls might snare his feet on the way.

With teeth set firmly to overcome his tendency to retreat in face of unknown dangers, but resolute to go on, he felt along the wall and around a turn. There filtered to his eyes a dim ray of light.

The light came through a small fissure, a sort of natural vent in the sloping rock side of the hill. Would it open into the bandits' crevasse?

Rod cautiously drew close, put his eye to the small spot.

It was larger than he had supposed. Brush, thick and matted, had been placed cleverly against the slope to conceal the opening. By some plaiting of matted stems the whole cover was held together, like a rude, flat-bottomed basket, filled with turf, leaves, and matted mesquite. That made an effective hood to set into the opening. If no chance foot climbed the hill and by coincidence felt the give of the stuff, the opening might never be detected.

Rod cautiously pushed the mat aside, peered out and saw that he looked down a long, curving fissure, with its high sides going up, it seemed, almost to touch the sky. Dim light, even at midmorning, was all that filtered down to him. But in it he could see a clear way to go, and Rodney went wriggling through the hole, replaced the mat, and slid down the sharp slope, about

six feet, to the rocky floor of the abyss, down which he hastened.

A long way he had to go, winding in and around through the hills.

He tried to estimate the time, comparing it with the former trip.

"I had a queer flight in the Jenny, getting here," he mused when his computation failed to accomplish any result, "but this is another kind of flight—and for me it's even queerer!"

At its end the cleft bent at a sharp angle and when he had peered around it and recognized his small Jenny, still with its nose down on the sod, Rod grinned.

"A queer flight, I said!" he remarked. "Right back where I started from—and there's another airplane flying over. Can they see me?"

He raced into the clear, snatched out a handkerchief.

Dancing, waving, he sought to attract attention. Almost at once he realized there was no need for his strenuous work.

The airplane—his father's Express high-wing if he knew ships!—was coming down—dead stick—out of gas!

CHAPTER XXII

TIM GOES INTO BONDAGE

THEY had little reserve of gas. Quickly the liner left them behind. Tim began to watch for a safe landing spot. Pat, seeing a figure with waving arms, in the smaller valley, called Tim's attention.

Ten minutes later they were slapping Rodney and receiving his eager pummeling.

"It's good to be together!" Rod cried, forgetting caution. "But—you say the air liner deserted—with Dad and—but Joe couldn't be in the liner. He's—" he sobered, "he's 'gone West!'" Tim and Pat demurred.

Both had seen Joe. The injured man must be another than Joe.

"That Ren is 'putting something over' on Rod," Tim told Pat.

"And by this time," Rodney exclaimed, "those rich men are prisoners."

He turned to retrace his steps toward the fissure whence he had emerged just before.

"Wait! Rod, where are you going?" Tim caught his arm.

"I must go back," Rod declared. "I intend to find out why that man on the mattress in the cave used Joe's name. It wasn't Joe, you say! It couldn't have been Nelse because you heard them tell about his radio call. So—it must have been Henry—and I mean to see what he means by driving down—but he's—he's not alive. He must have been raving!"

"What good will it do for you to put your head into the lion's jaws again?" Tim expostulated. "You admit you can't operate the radio. Now I can! Let me go!"

"Well, then, I'll go with you. What good can I do here? Our Jenny has a smashed prop. Your Express can't fly without gas. I might be able to help you. Certainly I can guide you—and two heads are better than one!"

"Rod's right!" Pat agreed.

"I know—but wait!" Tim caught Rod's arm. "But Father is probably with the captured passengers."

"We don't know whether he is now or not," Tim argued. "We couldn't stop to identify anybody. We had to get up and off with no waits. But if he is captured, Rod, they won't hurt him. And what can you do in the chasm? You have said you can't run that radio."

"I don't! But Father might. I——"

"Let's all go into bondage!" said Pat, begin-

ning to chuckle. "At any rate they'd feed us—and I haven't eaten since——"

"No wonder you can't think!" Tim snapped. "What good would it do for all of us to put our heads in the lion's mouth? Let me go!"

He could probably operate the radio, he argued, logically. Tim was interested in that part of aviation, and had built several knock-down sets. He knew how to send, also.

He suggested that the others ought to hide the two airplanes, at least get them out of sight from the pass, and themselves hide.

"Pat and you can stand by, with the receiving set in the Express," he insisted. "I can find my way to the place to get in the cave, Rod. Then if the coast is clear I can send you an O.K. and then call for Hawkins and Teddy——"

Rod's face fell, and Tim paused to ask why.

"Bully!" cried Pat, forgetting the need for caution. "There's one more to add to our list of suspicious people."

"Look-you!" Tim persisted with his own idea, ignoring his twin, "Rod, if I can't send right away, you can wait till after noon and if you want to you can come in then. Come as far as the hole-in-the-wall if you don't get my O.K., and if I can't send a message I can tell that renegade adventurer of an 'op' to call you, maybe."

"Just so it's a call to dinner!" suggested Pat.

"I'll have it sent out on a gold plate," retorted Tim. "And a new propeller, and some gas and oil, and the names of whoever deserted on the Oakland Queen, and where she went, and so on. Any other little thing you'd like, just order it!"

Pat took the rebuff and sarcasm with his usual good spirits.

"Some day," he told Rodney as they hauled the two light aircraft behind a jog of rock where they would be less conspicuous, "some day I'll show Tim that I do think, and use my head. He gets results in a second. Maybe I take a day But——"

"The tortoise can win a race from the hare," chuckled Rod, "and persistency pays, Pat. Here's proof! I bought some chocolate bars night before last, and didn't eat them. I forgot about them till now. So here's your breakfast." He divided the small tidbits fairly.

While they munched, knowing that Tim would be fed when he went to his bondage, the slim twin located the cleverly placed brush cover of the chimney hole in the defile.

He stood wondering whether to go in at once and what he might find in the darkness beyond the fissure.

"There's one thing I don't understand," he

told himself. "Rod told us that he 'walked' in—but he 'climbed' out! Now—how was that?"

A glance toward the continuation of the defile failed to help. It ran straight along for perhaps a hundred yards. There a blank, and unscalable rock wall faced him. He moved toward it, watching both sides of the sloping defile for concealed doors through some thin wall but saw nothing helpful.

He turned sharply, hearing a sound behind him. The grass camouflage, dislodged suddenly, slid down the slope.

"Car-r-ramba!" Tim, flat against the wall, but not able to find a bit of concealment there, saw an angry, hatless head project from the chimney-fissure.

Perhaps the man was a guard, coming out to relieve the one who, by his entry, had revealed the pivoted rock door to Rodney before.

At any rate he had dislodged the rock-chimney camouflage: gravity had done the rest.

Tim knew that he had not one chance in a thousand to stay there, and be unobserved. The man must climb down to get the brush cover and to pick up and destroy loosened bits. His eyes would turn from the exit—to Tim.

The youth knew that half-breed Mexican natives acted on the old Spanish proverb, *"los muertos no hablan"*—silenced lips do not re-

peat what has been seen or heard—as Tim roughly translated the phrase. Tim did not want to be silenced.

"Car-r-ramba!" he was discovered.

"Here!" Tim thought swiftly, advancing, "I'll get that stuff for you!" He rushed close, knowing quite well that the man would not be satisfied to stay inside. Tim wanted to lure the man into a position where a plan, swiftly matured, could be used.

"Get back, I come out!"

The man put his elbows outside, resting his weight on them as he began to wriggle forward, a somewhat plump figure for that opening.

Instantly Tim leaped upward, against the sloping rock, catching the arms and letting his weight slide him down till he had a grip on the wrists. The man, with Tim's weight dragging his elbows from the supporting earth, slumped forward, his torso out in the sunlight that fell into the pass at noon, his hips and legs in the dark room beyond the wall. Tim's weight held him so that his compressed stomach was too painful to permit struggles.

"Rod!—Pat!—Rod!—" shouted Tim.

"Be still, you!" a voice spoke behind him. "Let go!"

Tim released his hold, slid onto the path, trapped, beaten!

CHAPTER XXIII

WINGS SET FREE

UNCERTAINTY and idleness make a poor partnership, and Rodney, not knowing to what fate Tim had generously given himself, chafed and fretted, walking to and fro beside the useless wings that mocked him by their presence.

If he had a propeller he could do something to fix up the Curtiss ship.

If he had gas he could fly the Express monoplane!

Where was his father? Who had deserted in the Oakland Queen? Why had the ship been taken away—to escape the bandits—or for a more wicked purpose?

The departure of that air liner, leaving the millionaires marooned to be captured, could mean a free hand for the real backers of the mysterious Wall Street schemers. Had that been why the ship took off?

Would Tim to able to get in and use the radio? What was it there for, anyway? Why did bandits, in such an isolated place, have no riding animals? In all the stories Rod had read,

Mexican half-breeds rode ponies, led pack burros carrying the spoils of their forays.

Where could such men stage forays among these hills, South of the California border?

Rod threw up his hands in dismay and dejection.

"If you'd sit down, the way I do, and rest," Pat spoke from the shade of a wing of the Jenny. "I'd like it, Rod. You make me nervous and that makes me hungrier. The chocolate is all absorbed already!"

With the easy-going nature given to most fleshy youths, Pat had made himself comfortable.

His body had been inactive; but his mind was not.

As Rod paced, Pat thought. His brother's taunts had never had a pleasant reception. Pat had always wanted to vindicate himself; but in times of excitement there was no time for his slower, more methodical mentality to function to any good end.

Here he had the time, the quiet, the opportunity.

"I've been thinking, Rod," he added as Rod threw himself on his stomach and buried his despondent face in his arms.

"Go right ahead, don't mind me!" Rod was too much occupied with his own disturbing

thoughts to take any interest in Pat's well-known poverty of ideas.

"Well, all right. I won't mind you. I'll work it out by myself. I'll find some reason why those fellows were so quick to put a rag in your mouth the minute you started to shout, when they grabbed you."

"To make me stop!"

"Why should they? They didn't tie you up. You couldn't run away so they didn't bother about that. But they did bother to stop you from yelling. Why? This is an isolated place."

"Haven't I got enough to think about, with Tim going into the crevasse, with the air liner escaping—vanishing!—and no way to follow?"

"Another thing," Pat proceeded calmly, "you told Tim and me that the bandits blindfolded you and 'led' you to the place where they let you go. But you came out—another way. Now—how is that?"

"I don't know, and I don't see what use there is to bother."

"Well, Rod, the thing that puzzles me is this: we can't fly away to rescue those millionaires, unless we get some gas. With fuel you could fly the Express, over the cliff, and 'spot' that secret way that they 'walked' you in. Then you could fly to San Diego, get help, and come back. I'd slip in, get caught, manage to warn who-

ever is in there with Tim—maybe your father! —to get in the caves and stay out of range while you led an attack by airplane, bombarded the Lion's Mouth, scared those fellows so they would leave, and let Tim and I lead the millionaires out. Wouldn't that be grand?"

"How would you get the gas?"

"That's what I've been thinking so hard for—and, Rod, you know that big oaks sprout from small seedlings!"

"All right," tolerantly, "I'm listening."

"Well, Rodney, the only way I can explain those fellows gagging you as soon as you began to make a noise is—if there might be somebody near enough to hear you—somebody they wouldn't want to take notice!"

Rodney sprang to his feet with a sharp thrust of arms against the rough, grassy earth.

"Pat!"

"Supposing there was a ranch, or a mine, somewhere beyond the hill to the West. A ranch might mean horses, cattle, stables—and that would mean drinking water. Drinking water would mean a pump—and——"

"A pump would mean an engine—maybe run by gasoline that we could beg or buy!"

Rodney was at once his usually efficient self.

"I thought, several times, when it has been so

still, here, I heard something go 'glung-clug' like a pumping engine, Rod!"

"Let's go across, climb the hill and take a look-see!"

"Wait!" warned Pat. Rod turned, already starting. "Rod, we'd better delay a little while until we see whether Tim comes out."

"No! I'll go and you stay. And, Pat—if you hear the least sound, hide in the tail of the Jenny. Don't risk being caught. If we can get gas, it will take both of us to bring enough to fly to San Diego!"

Pat promised, Rod was about to start again.

The grate of a foot on a rolling pebble startled him, swung him back.

From the defile Tim had entered came a sheepish half-breed, with a tall, gaunt, weather-tanned white man. Between them, gagged and with tightly covered eyes, came Tim. They paused on the grass.

"Where are they?" the white man demanded.

"Who?" asked Tim, innocently.

"You aren't the one who escaped!" the man snapped, "and my guard reported that the little airplane by the big one had two boys in it, a skinny one and a fat one!"

"Well?"

"You must have landed in the little airplane.

There it is! I see the tail sticking out beyond that shoulder of rock. Where are they?"

"You can see better than I can!" said Tim, meaningly.

Inwardly he was thrilled. Rod and Pat had escaped! But Tim maintained his pose of being disgusted and innocent of any hidden knowledge.

"Both airplanes are there—the one Ellis' son used and busted, and yours. Where did the kids go?"

"Over the hills and far away!" Tim said breezily.

Pat, breathing dust and cramping his muscles in an effort to be quiet; and Rodney, also concealed in the back of the second fuselage, heard an exclamation.

"Car-r-ramba!" and in Spanish which Rod translated, "Boss, if the boys go——"

"Be still, Carlos! Go up the hill and look! I'll take this one back 'in'—and see that a better watch is kept hereafter. If you see anything of them—*'los muertos no hablan'* you know!"

" 'El Carlos no hablan!' " Tim changed the name from general meaning covering all men to the special name he had heard.

He heard Carlos mutter *"Madre de Dios!"* and was pleased. Carlos was a coward. But how

to use the knowledge he did not "see" as, with covered eyes he walked along in darkness.

"There must be some way to capture Carlos." Rod projected his head through the trap flap in the body of the Express, when all was quiet.

"Just wait! Patience counts here, Rod!" Pat puffed out a dusty breath and eased his muscles to more favorable positions as they were convinced that no one was very near.

It required patience to lie in cramped quarters, but Rod and Pat persevered.

"Listen!" Pat's muffled voice came to Rodney. "If we could lure the 'greaser' to stalk me—could you surprise him, do you suppose?"

They talked over plans, finally hitting on one.

Carefully Rod inspected the situation. The half-breed was looking beyond the rising hill to the West, about six hundred feet away.

"He's watching something," Rod reported. "Climb out—quickly, but be careful to make as little noise as you have to!"

When, ten minutes later, Carlos became satisfied that on the road beyond the hill there were no boys, and turned, he saw one lying at full length, apparently asleep, in the shade of an airplane wing.

There was one of the culprits who had brought down on him the censure of his Chief by being close by when Carlos had opened the

secret camouflage cover of the egress from the Chief's quarters.

Carlos grinned, maliciously, crookedly.

On quiet feet he crossed the sunny saucer, his hand in his sash.

Snores, from a plump body, coming through a widely open mouth, reassured Carlos. He advanced. He came quietly close. He bent over.

Around from the concealment of the low tail Rod leaped, as Pat squirmed away. The battle against the surprised half-breed was brief. He was strong but they were quick and determined. Soon they left him, well trussed in the staking rope, with his own bandana to keep him quiet. Beyond the hill they raced.

An hour later the roar of an engine broke silence. Pat had freed Rod's wings!

CHAPTER XXIV

A FLIGHT AGAINST TIME

CLIMBING as quickly as he dared, Rodney began a circle over the rocky ledge that fronted on the small plateau he had recently left.

He knew that the sound of the engine would carry warningly among the silent hills; but he had to discover the way they had walked him into the Lion's Mouth.

On his first drive along the upper face of the rock he discovered at least a partial solution of the secret—a pass from the other plateau.

Banking and leveling off with his engine throttled back, Rodney maintained his level flight with occasional adjustments of stick and rudder while, with busy hands, he sketched on the back of an envelope a small, but clear design.

That accomplished, he found his bunch of private keys, slipped them into the open envelope for a weight, swung back to a line that would take his ship across the small plateau, and began a glide.

As he drew closer Rod saw the small Jenny beside the cliff, noted the figure lying under the

shade of a wing, saw Pat waiting for him, dropped in his glide almost to the earth and flung out the envelope. Then, with opened throttle, Rod zoomed back into his climb, and away.

He had to get to San Diego, make certain preparations, secure some necessary materials and get back before dark.

"If I don't," he mused, "I won't be able to see how to work our plan, and Pat won't be able to carry out what I scribbled under the plan of the pass into the big gash where Tim is."

San Diego came into view in time.

Rodney circled the small flying field there, which he had used before, got his "come in" signal and set down the Express.

To his delight, soon after he made his formal registration, a sleepy-eyed Teddy came racing over to him as he refueled the ship.

"Hello! Ted, what have you been doing with yourself?"

The account was without eventfulness. Teddy had stuck close to the receiving and sending set of his amateur acquaintance, its operator, taking turns at the headset.

They had picked up the distress call, just at the end after the young and over-zealous operator had almost spoiled it by his continual calls. They had heard the morning call to the Oak-

land Queen from Nelse, reporting his purpose to fly the substitute airship on the Oakland Queen's course so that no one would be the wiser until the Oakland Queen could meet him, later, and take up her own flight.

Mr. Hawkins, who had come down by early train from Los Angeles, came across the field.

"Here you are, then!" he greeted Rodney cheerfully and, trying not to show the reserve of emotion which came from his knowledge that Hawkins was a war pilot who might use the French idioms, "contact" and "coupe" and thus disclose his identity as the "man behind the Wall Street plan to wreck the Billion Dollar crowd," Rodney shook hands.

"Let's hear your adventures," suggested Hawkins.

"I think they will have to wait," Rod said, keeping his voice polite, for all his haste. "I must get back—and I have to get hold of a propeller for the Curtiss Jenny, to take back. Besides, I have to locate a pilot with a five or six place airplane, to go down among the Mexican hills to pick up some of the marooned people. The Oakland Queen set down, and bandits got them before they could get back to the ship and take off."

"Bandits, eh? That's bad. All right, Rodney." Hawkins at once took command of the

situation. "You hop back, Ted will hire a two-place crate with a pilot to fly him to Los Angeles. You can't get a prop to fit the Jenny any nearer. I'll bring down a bigger ship. It may take time to locate her. There aren't many such 'planes to be had for the asking."

Rodney nodded; for the moment he began to think that he had been unjust to connect Hawkins with such a suspicion as he had held. The ex-pilot certainly threw himself into his own undoing, with amazing energy, if he was really behind the Wall Street scheme, Rod thought.

But then, all he had to go on, Rod reflected, was the fact that Hawkins was formerly a war flyer. He might not use the words revealed as his characteristic by the man in the Lion's maw.

"I want to get back right away," Rod explained. "Then I can do what Pat and I have agreed on, and have light enough to see by. Thank you for helping, sir."

"Oh, Dad would be bound to do all he could," Teddy said with the same confidence in his own parent that Rod had in Mr. Ellis. "Leave it all to him."

"Yes," agreed Hawkins, "I'll attend to things here. I hope it won't take too long, though," he said, as Rod saw fresh oil put in his feed tank. "I've booked for New York, on the Trans-

continental line, to fly tomorrow morning early. About an invention," he added calmly.

Rodney's heart sank.

Another man going off to New York.

"I guess we'll have everything fixed right before morning," Rod said. "Now, sir, I must go to the stores hanger for some signal lights and if Ted could get the engine warm——"

"Right-o!" Ted sprang to the propeller, waving away the mechanics while his father slipped into the cockpit.

Rod, moving away, toward the hangar from which he would secure necessary supplies, heard the calls between son and father.

"Switch off, Dad?"

"Coupe!"

"Gas on!"

"Gas on!"

The propeller swung around.

"Switch on!"

"Contact!"

Rod moved away with a whirling brain.

The ex-pilot had used the phrases current during war flights.

He was going to New York in the morning, flying on the two-day hop and train trip combined. Why? To "see about an invention?" Was that a true statement? Or, thought Rod, did the ex-war ace want to "turn loose the

bears" now that he knew the rich men were captives?

"I can't accuse him," Rod mused, dejected. "And—I can't stop him unless I can find Father and bring him here!"

Rodney realized that his flight against time was no longer only a way to take advantage of the daylight.

He must get those millionaires free, must get back and find some way to get them home without the newspapers finding out.

And Hawkins might tell!

Hurriedly snapping the chin strap of his helmet, catching the clasp on his safety belt, Rodney waved a hand, received his signal and ran forward into the wind, getting aloft as rapidly as he could.

That flight was almost a nightmare to Rodney.

Once, over the airway, the engine, urged to its top speed, faltered; but he nursed it, clearing out the gases and easing speed for a few moments.

His mind was too greatly disturbed by his fears concerning Hawkins to permit his usual calmness; he fought back his tendency to force the light craft beyond its powers.

As he got into the hills, and began watching for the peak that he must round before he could

pick up the small valley he sought, his heart went sick and a chill raced down his spine.

The engine stopped, went on, but haltingly!

Quickly, automatically depressing the nose into a glide, he began a feverish search for the trouble.

Seconds counted.

He dared not get too low.

Rocks were under him, beside his course, behind him, in front!

With a thankful heart he discovered the loosened wire leading from the switch to the generator.

Holding that in place until he managed to get the hot-spark contact he needed, he held the connection together while, with his arm straining, he managed the stick with his left hand, until the binding post whose thumb-nut had vibrated loose could be tightened down.

Once more he climbed, and just in time to get out of the arms of the surrounding, rocky hills.

Once more on his way, he found no difficulty in choosing the right spot, and flew across the plateau with his eyes searching its expanse for signs of Pat.

Pat was not there.

Rod was disappointed. They had arranged that when he returned, he would get a signal, and cruise until Pat, with some of Rod's new

flares, would slip through the secret way into the big crevasse, warn the others and then signal for Rod to "do his act" over the chasm.

With Pat absent it seemed that the plan had failed.

Still, he decided, he would fly up and over the Lion's Mouth and see how things looked in that great gash in the rocks.

He climbed, banked, chose his course, crossed the peak and flew on, zooming up again. But he saw nothing in the gloom already growing deep in the low cleft. He could not see whether men were in the open or not. He did not know what to do.

Flying in a wide circle, he tried to think.

He had no means of knowing what had happened to Pat, where Tim was, who had been captured and held in the crevasse.

The Jenny, he saw in the fading light on the plateau as the Western hill cut off the sun's rays, was still beside the rocks.

Where was Pat?

Why had he not stayed hidden, to receive the parcel Rod would drop, so that with it he could go to Tim's rescue, lead the captive millionaires out, while Rod engaged the attention of the bandits and fanned their terrors?

Had Carlos, the captured bandit watchman

assigned to the plateau, been able to turn the tables and make Pat his prisoner?

Rodney, uncertain and helpless, cruised for awhile.

The sun left the upper edge of the cliff.

It was getting too dark to stay there. Rod did not dare to land for fear of some trap he could not discern.

While he banked, his clutch on the stick tightened.

From beyond the cliff, rising with a fiery trail, appeared a rocket that burst in a cascade of blue light.

That had been the agreed signal. But Pat had no such rocket.

Had his plan been discovered, anticipated? Were the bandits trying to lure him?

There was only one way to know. There should be a second signal.

Nursing his bank, watching the sky, Rod waited.

CHAPTER XXV

CARLOS "AIDS" THE SKY SCOUTS

COUNTING his steps, Tim was led along into bondage. A hundred; they turned right, into the fissure: forty; the elbow was turned; many more steps Tim added mentally.

Then he got a surprise.

They did not stop where he supposed the rock chimney-hole to be. Yet there were not more than a possible sixty steps to the blank wall ending the fissure. And they proceeded for two hundred. The sound of their feet became hollow.

"There must be another door—into the cave that Rod saw Joe—or Joe's substitute—in," Tim reflected. "If I can find that door again, I'll be all right."

He walked on, mentally noting turns, twists, steps.

Then, stopped, he was allowed to remove the blindfold. He gazed with blinking eyes around the sunlit gorge.

Everything Rod had described was noted quickly.

But there were new faces to be seen—cap-

tives! Tim took stock of them with surprise.

Neither Mr. Ellis, nor Mr. Stedman—nor Joe—was visible.

"Where's the rest of the prisoners?" he asked the man beside him.

"Got away in the Oakland Queen."

"How did Joe get from the ship in here for Rodney to see, and then get back in time for us to see him?" he demanded.

"Next you'll be asking where he is. Well, I don't know, and don't care—much. He 're-covered' when Rod thought he was a goner, this ay emm," he chuckled. "Joe's slick. For all I know, he may be in the air liner, planning more deviltry—or he may be up on the cliffs, watching us. Anyhow, he is the livest man I ever met!" he spoke cheerfully.

"You don't, by any chance, mean Henry, and not Joe?"

The man he supposed to be Ren, frowned.

"Henry? I don't know! He told me his name was Joe."

"All right," Tim said. "When the soldiers get here, you will be a sicker man than Rod thought Joe-Henry was. And you'll find out—if he didn't when he crashed—that you can't 'play with fire' and not be burned!"

"Soldiers!" Ren leaped closer, caught Tim's

arm in a grip of steel. "What are you talking about?"

Tim, seeing that his wildly thrown hint struck true, laughed.

"You wait!" he said darkly.

One of the men in the group of captives laughed.

"You're the lad Mr. Ellis called Tim, aren't you?" As Tim nodded he went on, "Well, we're all captives together—how much does he expect to get for your release?"

"If my father means what he says—" Tim grinned sheepishly, "—I think they'll pay this man to keep me here—more than to let me go!"

The group joined in the laugh.

"I'll tell you a secret if you won't say a word," another of the captives volunteered. "When this 'bimbo' starts trying to collect on us—well, I only hope I'll be there to see his face!"

"You'll be there, all right!" snapped Ren, apparently more worried by Tim than by the other man's hints. He still held the youth's arm.

"Where did you see soldiers?" he demanded.

"Over the hills and far away!" Tim repeated what he had said on the plateau, before, about Rod's escape with Pat.

Ren scowled. "You boys had better not ruin my plans!" he warned.

"We're not bothering about him spoiling your game," spoke a captive. "What interests us, just now is: when do we eat?"

"As soon as I can get caviar and pate-de-fois-gras and other food—if provision suitable for millionaires can be procured," chuckled Ren.

"Come and sit with us, Tim," the frock-coated man suggested. "This is your chance to dine at the table with a 'Billion Dollars' worth' of bear-bait!" Tim had to smile at the expression. These men, he reflected, took enforced captivity more than cheerfully. They seemed to be making a lark of it, to be getting a lot of fun out of it.

"If I knew why the air liner deserted," Tim told himself, "I'd feel more like joining the spirit of their fun."

They laughed and joked with him; but he mentally tabulated the faces, and, when rough but plentiful food was served, noted, with dismay that the only absentees from the group were three whom he most wished to have present.

The absentees were Mr. Ellis, Joe and Leonard Stedman!

Dejected and morose at the inferences this discovery compelled, Tim threw himself on a

blanket after the noon repast, frustrated and hopeless. If Rod's father, with Joe, whom Tim could not free from suspicion, and the man whose initials had confused them, had taken the air liner, it might be—it almost seemed that it must be—that they had some connection with that Wall Street plan.

He could not do anything.

Granting the chance that he might get to the radio, whose aerial he detected at once, he could hardly flash to the world a call that would wreck Rodney's faith in his father.

The long hours slipped by with lagging, torturing slowness.

High above, the sun bathed the peaks: a long, curving stretch of sky shone with brilliant, intense blue, speckled by golden, fleecy clouds. But in the gash the shadows were gathering; a man threw more wood on the fire.

From an unexpected quarter came excited, gutteral cries, and as Tim sprang to his feet with the rest, seeking the source of the thudding steps made by feet running on gravel, rock and pebbles, a short, stocky figure appeared, far up the narrow crevasse, waving short arms, calling hoarsely.

How had he gotten in? Whence had he come?

Tim, as he wondered, recognized the dirty old coat and the torn trousers that spelled "Carlos!"

The figure had a dirt-smeared face with something sticky and red showing through a rude bandage wrapped about the upper part of the head. A hand, continually straying to the spot, seemed always to have fresh red on it from the wound. The other hand, between gestures, went repeatedly to support and to caress the jaw.

Dirty, disheveled, the figure of Carlos tried in broken jargon to explain some terrific battle to the Chief.

"Those kids have jumped on him and they must have come near breaking his jaw as well as his head," Ren snapped to his half-breed subaltern. "Come on, men—let's go and see what we can do about it. You lie down, Carlos. I'll fix you up as soon as we get back!"

With a number of his men he rushed into the cave where the exit lay.

"That's strange!" Tim turned to the man who seemed most inclined to talk, while most of the Billion Dollar crowd chuckled but said little. "They led me in through the cave those men ran into. There must be a secret door there. But Carlos—the man who just arrived—came by some other route. If we could only find it!"

He sketched his notion of what must have happened. Probably Pat and Rod had remained in hiding while Carlos went to see whatever was to be seen beyond the small plateau. The chums

must have surprised the guard; or he might have discovered them. A battle had resulted. From the appearance of Carlos, as Tim delightedly stated, his comrades had given a good account of themselves.

"But what happened to them?" he finished, uncertainly.

Carlos, turning to a more comfortable position on the hard earth, discovered Tim. Furthermore, his eyes, from under the bandage, seemed to fix on the youth with a venomous stare.

"S-s-s-s-st!" the figure rolled over, still nursing a jaw that had a considerable swelling to all appearances there in the deepening dusk.

"Scuttle out of this!" whispered one of the men beside Tim. "He's after your blanket, or he means to take it out on you for what the others did to him——"

Tim held his position. He stayed, squatting on his haunches, his eyes intently watching the man's form that slowly came up to a crouch, the hand that strayed to a dirty sash and drew from it the handle of an object that caught light from the sky above and glinted with steely flashes.

"S-s-s-s-st! Ca-car-r-ram—ow!" In the middle of Carlos' favorite exclamation the strain

on the jaw seemed unbearable; the yell of pain accompanied a lurch to unsteady feet.

"You—gringo!" grunted the squat figure. "Ho! I feex—*si!*"

He approached Tim.

"Here! Let that knife alone!" the frock-coated man warned.

For answer the approaching one waved the glistening blade menacingly.

With a common impulse the group broke up. Some ran into the cave. Others went further away, beyond the fire.

Tim remained tense, ready, crouching.

He would try to disarm the man whose befuddled brain seemed to have chosen him as the object for spite and vemon.

Closer came the figure.

Taunter grew Tim's nerves, holding his muscles against the instinctive desire to spring away.

"I nick heem—I nick heem—I make heem cry —ca-rar-r-ram'—like hees fr'en' make me— s-s-so-o-o!"

Softly he drew closer.

Tim was almost ready to spring.

He would catch that upflung wrist, deflect the blade.

Something round, shining, white, refracting light, seemed to be flicking into his eyes.

He blinked. Between the flickers he traced the source.

A round reflector that was not a mirror, was in the cupped left hand of his adversary. Tim stared.

"I—nick—heem—s-s-so-o-o!"

As the voice spoke hoarsely, the left hand shifted to and fro.

That round object suddenly identified itself to Tim.

Pat's Scout compass!

He held his muscles in leash, watchful. How had Carlos secured the compass? What was he doing the flicking motion for? Tim considered swiftly. The man was spelling something in flashes of the reflector made by the compass glass.

Suddenly Tim muttered an amazed word.

"Pat!"

"S-s-s-s-sh-h-s-s-s-st! I nick—you—Tim, keep quiet. Our lives may depend on it. Here! Hide this rocket. I got it from the Jenny. Rod and I overpowered Carlos. We tied him up. We wondered—s-s-so!"

Tim squealed and cowered, playing his part, quickly caught and acted on, while Pat, in his clever disguise, pretended to jab at him, to torture him, ever watchful lest some one creep on him from behind.

"There's an encampment of Mex. soldiers over beyond the hill," Pat whispered between simulated tortures with the sharp blade. "We showed Rod's papers to their lieutenant and he spoke enough English to—s-s-so! I neek you one more, eh! How that feels, eh? Ca-car-r-ram!'

"They are hunting for these fellows in this place, but don't know how to get in," Pat hurried on. "These men, under Ren, are smugglers who carry Chinese and Japanese illegally over the border into California. The leader must use some sort of airplane, but the Mex. lieutenant wasn't sure about that. But he has picked up radio talks, and that's what the aerial is for Ca-rar-r-ram!' "

Swiftly he outlined Rod's plan. Gas, secured from a few motorists stopped on the highway beyond the camp, had yielded fuel enough for a hop to San Diego. Rod was to return with rockets and red fires, with bombs and other missiles calculated to terrify the unsuspicious denizens of the Lion's maw.

"I got the diagram of the pass from the other plateau, where we found the air liner," Pat added. "I tore Carlos' coat off him, almost stood him on his head to get his old pants, and left him, pretty mad, but still tied, to the mercy of the Mexican soldiers. I searched the Jenny

and found a rocket Rod had not used. It was marked with blue so I knew I could use it. Of course there were flares; I brought a red one. Now, hide them, till Rod comes back. When he doesn't see me on the landing spot he will fly over here—then send up the blue rocket, and, as soon as you can after that, set off the red flare.

"I'll lead the crowd to the pass and away. But you must warn them all, between now and dusk, to be under cover when Rod starts his 'barrage.'"

"I will," said Tim. "But the bandits will run out through the secret way."

"They'll run into the arms of the Mex. soldiers," Pat murmured.

He turned, as though weary of the torture, flung himself on the blanket, and nursed his supposedly injured jaw, while Tim, affecting to feel tenderly the pricked skin of his arm, moved to the cave where he contrived to conceal the small packet Pat had passed to him, as he told the grouped captives his amazing story.

Ren returned. There had been a battle, he said; but the two other youths had escaped in the Express ship, it appeared, leaving trampled earth, torn clothing and other souvenirs of their tussle with Carlos.

Pat, sheathing the knife, smiled in the growing darkness.

The wait was tedious, but in the last sunbeams to bathe the upper crest, an airplane flew swiftly across the gash.

Three minutes later Tim, surreptitiously maneuvering, set off the blue rocket, far up at the end of the gash, where the smashed airplane had come down.

Then he placed the red flare, hoping he could delay discovery of his true purpose by saying he had discovered the signals that had dropped from the falling ship, perhaps, and had set them off "for fun."

But as he struck the last match on the paper packet he had borrowed from the older men, its head flew harmlessly away, and he was in the grip of an infuriated Ren before he could run to get more matches.

"Gosh!" he muttered, "Rod won't know whether it's a trap or what!"

Flying around the peaks Rod waited vainly for the reassuring red.

Then he saw it.

Pat, in his disguise, had seen the difficulty.

In more ways than one Carlos, at least by proxy, came to the rescue of the Sky Scouts.

Pat ignited the red flare!

In thirty seconds the barrage began!

CHAPTER XXVI

THE AIR ATTACK

Rodney, flying dejectedly, saw the red flare.

"There's my signal!" he exulted. Sure of the airworthiness and perfect performance of his father's light Express high-wing, he threw it around on wingtip, and leveled off.

As he made his approach toward the long, curving gash of the Lion's maw he set out from a pocket the small percussion bombs he had secured.

"These will go off like a bang, like a cannon!" he chuckled, "and this sort makes a lot of bright electrical flashes and each one of the flashes ends with a report like a rifle shot! They will scare the men who smuggle Chinese and Japs over the California and Texas border but they won't harm anybody who doesn't get right near one as it goes off."

Tim, dragging Pat toward the mouth of the cave "Joe" had been put in after the blazing ship came down the night before, saw Rod's approach, saw the winking of his flying lights.

"Hurry, Pat!" he whispered, pulling his

brother faster; Tim raised his voice to a shout.

"A bomber—look!" he pointed aloft.

That was to terrify the bandit crew. The others had been warned and were in the cave, sheltered and safe.

"Come this way—Mr.—Ren!" Pat panted, beckoning. They wanted the bandit chief to be their own capture.

"Crash—crackle—bang—thud!"

Rod's attack had begun.

Horrified, thrown into a panic by the unexpected explosions dropping into their hiding place from the sky, the half-breeds leaped away from the firelight and began to run toward the cave.

Shielding his head from flying sparks and his eyes from the vivid glare, Tim dragged his slower twin to the cave.

"This way, Mr. Ren!" he cried, wishing to be able to say that they had made the capture of the man who, they were sure, headed the bandit gang. Ren followed them. The line of men within the cave opened to admit the trio.

With a shout of evident glee at the exciting situation the "Billion Dollar" group admitted them, talking interestedly as bomb after bomb flashed and crashed, sending echoes reverberating across the hills.

The bandits, trying to follow their leader, met

solid resistance, and in their terror scattered toward the pass to the large plateau. No longer secret, Tim whispered to Pat, that pass was guarded by soldiers. Proof of the truth of his assertion came quickly. Shots popped, men screamed in fear and ran back, to be followed, captured by the Mexican soldiers.

The attack was over.

"Now," Tim turned toward Ren, "I guess you see that it won't do any good to try to escape! The Lion's jaws have shut on you, too."

Ren paid no attention. A huge bonfire had been kindled by the soldiers as a signal to Rodney that the coup was complete, that his bombs must no longer be dropped. Rod, seeing the fire, flew in cruising circles, high overhead, waiting to be sure that he would no longer be needed to fly after some escaping bandit.

Tim saw the direction of Ren's stare as the firelight came in at the cave mouth, lighting its interior fitfully.

"Where's Joe?" gasped Ren.

"Good acting!" laughed Tim, exulting in the success of Rod's plan. "You know as well as we do that Joe wasn't in this place. Who was it?"

"Who did you try to pass off as Joe?" demanded Pat.

"I tell you it was Joe!" They saw Ren's face scowling at them.

"We tell you it wasn't!" Tim retorted. "We've seen Joe—he's gone off in the air liner!"

"Then he—escaped!" cried Ren.

"Oh, stop pretending!" cried Pat. "You know that you and—whoever you tried to make Rod think was Joe—are in this together. At least we've got you!—what's the use?——"

"Look here!" Ren whirled on his heel to confront Tim, angry and seemingly venomous, "don't try to be so smart. You haven't got me at all!" He moved toward the cave mouth.

"Lieutenant Morcadez!" he shouted. Then he turned, walking back to the group, "I'll soon show you—ah!" He turned back as a shadow darkened the doorway. "Come in—I want to——"

All of the men, and the twins, looked toward the doorway.

Blocking out the fire glow, a shadow and the silhouette of a soldier became visible.

"*Si, senors.* You call?"

"This man called for the lieu—" Tim broke off the word, turning to indicate Ren.

"Why!—" cried Pat, "where is he?"

Ren was gone.

He had not passed them.

"He's still in the cave!" cried Tim. "Call the soldiers, Pat! I'll search the dark corners."

With the delighted "rich men" aiding, a thorough search of the cave was made. Nothing was discovered except a bundled pile of garments in a dark corner. The twins, the men and soldiers arriving with the lieutenant, kicked them aside. They were hunting a man, not his garments.

"He isn't under them!" panted Tim. "There must be some secret door here, same as in the other cave. We mustn't let Ren get away!"

"Hurry to the other cave—Tim!" Pat begged.

Tim's feet fairly raced as he ran out, down the gorge, into the other passage and to the lever Rod had described beyond the radio table.

He operated the iron bar, felt the rock door give, squeezed through and fumbled along in the dark. He had no daylight to help him locate the chimney-hole he had seen from outside; but by stumbling over boxes and cases, probably full of loot, he thought, feeling along the wall, he finally located the break in the rock and managed to scramble through.

In the outer fissure he paused. It occurred to him as queer that Ren had disappeared through a seemingly blank back wall. Now, staring down the fissure, he got a quick, imaginary vision of the layout of the place.

"That big cave must back onto this end of the fissure!" he decided. "That means—if there is a secret door—the door must be at the end of this fissure, where I thought the wall was blank. Ren has gotten out onto the plateau!"

Turning, he fairly raced down the passage between the high rocks.

The plateau, where the Jenny still waited, minus a serviceable propeller, was dark; but Tim's eyes, accustomed to the dim light, probed for a moving figure or a shadow darker and stiller than the rest.

The sound of an engine being started turned his eyes toward the Jenny; but the little airplane still stuck in its place beside the boulder and Tim located the sound coming from above.

He ran backward, as far as was necessary to enable him to see the edge and a line angled across the upper cliff top.

The sound of the engine came from there!

Ren must be escaping in an airplane, hidden there for such emergency. He had probably climbed a rope ladder or steps cut in rock. Tim raced back, as fast as he could, down the fissure, through the hole, back to the gorge. By the time he got there a strange object was rising from the cliffs and he saw that unless Rod was still in the air—Ren would escape. High over the cliffs rose an auto-gyro!

CHAPTER XXVII

THE AUTO-GYRO

With a blanket hastily snatched up, the other side held by a man, Pat Kelly began to signal to the small Express that was still in sight, but going the other way.

"G-e-t h-i-m!" he spelled, by alternately concealing the fire's light and revealing it as he moved the blanket over the glowing sticks and then aside.

Rod, catching the final flickers of the message, watched as it was repeated, the alternate darkening and brightening of the glow giving him the Morse letters.

He knew, by simple elimination, who was wanted.

The man in the auto-gyro, Ren, was to be driven down.

Rod doubted if ever an amateur flyer had maneuvered against a more curious enemy, had ever, in battle or play, been pitted against a more elusive adversary.

In order to secure flying speed his own wings had to move in a straight line, forward, through

the air—or he had to climb under power or glide downward.

Because all of his speed work had to be done in a straight line, whether that line was level, tilted upward or descending, it compelled him to cover distance.

A spiral climb meant slower gaining of altitude.

The auto-gyro, that most modern of airplane mechanisms, wherein a magnified and re-designed form of propeller turns with its surfaces toward the sky, did not have to secure forward flying speed for take off, or to climb.

By securing a sufficient speed of revolution of its umbrella-like combination of propeller and wings, the modern device could go almost straight upward to its ceiling while the Express must spiral or go in a tight circle to gain altitude and still keep near the other craft.

"I'll have to let him get up above me," Rod chose his tactics as the other airplane rose higher and higher. "I can't make altitude as fast as he can. But let him go up. I can keep him in sight."

He went aloft in steadily decreased climbs as the rarefied atmosphere lowered the ratio of his power to its serviceability. Low to earth he had climbed as steeply as he dared. Higher up he

flattened his climbing angle to preserve safe flying reserve.

The auto-gyro went steadily up.

"He has to reach his ceiling by and by," Rod concluded. "Then if he wants to fly anywhere, he'll have a faithful convoy—flying rings around him as long as the gas holds out!"

A swift glance at his gauges reassured him. He had lots of fuel for almost any reasonable range of flight that the auto-gyro could make.

Seemingly poised on idle pinions above him, the auto-gyro moved gently across the ranges with the wind-drift.

Rod began to be curious.

"Why doesn't he incline those propeller-wings and start flying?" he murmured.

Instead, the man in the ship above him seemed content to stay as he was.

"He must come down by and by," Rod mused. "He'd better go somewhere. Unless he wants to get over a bad spot—and that's what he does want!"

The solution of the tactics had come to him. The man, knowing that he could rise and descend, with the gentle breeze then blowing, almost vertically, could land in places where the flying speed necessary to sustain the Express craft would necessitate fast landings.

"He has decided that I'll run out of gas first,"

Rod concluded. "If my gas gets low I'll have to leave, because there isn't a safe place for a fast ship to set down, not in these rough rocks. If I risk landing, I'll smash a wing or the prop, or the whole ship may be a washout—and he'll twist his vanes to the right angle and go romping away!"

There must be something done and without delay, to break that deadlock. Rod considered, flying in his tight circle under the other ship and watchful lest some unexpected mountain swirl, up or down, in the tricky air currents, might smash his light craft against a hillside or send him spinning into an abyss.

With a little grin, between tight lips, Rod drew the elevators upward, counteracting his bank by a lateral movement of the stick in the same interval and kicking opposite rudder to get on a straight line as he climbed.

He had a plan which seemed to him to be the only one.

"When in a deadlock," he muttered, "give up!"

He proceeded to fly away, in a very gentle climb, to get higher with relation to the up-reaching peaks beyond.

The auto-gyro remained as it was, while he flew away.

But Rodney got only far enough so that his

angle of climb gave him, as well as he could estimate, a slight advantage of height above the other craft.

There, in the chill mountain air, with danger in every foot of the creased and rugged land beneath him, he went around in a careful bank, holding his altitude.

Then he gave the gun, revved up to top speed, and, perhaps four hundred feet higher than the auto-gyro, made straight for the poised vanes of the lowly drifting craft.

"Go away!—" Rod repeated his last verbal remark to himself, "—and come back where I can start something!"

In a long, ever speedier gliding dive he went straight at the auto-gyro.

To his intense amazement the other craft gave no sign.

Was its pilot certain that Rod would alter his course? Rod thought that must be the reason.

He came perilously close and when the auto-gyro maintained its slow drift, its vanes whirling monotonously, Rod had to dive. He went under the ship, and with a hasty glance back as he zoomed upward, he saw that his disturbance of the air made the craft rock menacingly.

Still its pilot did not alter its position, or try to alter its vanes in any way.

Rod went around on wingtip as soon as he established his altitude on the other craft's level.

Flying past at diminished speed, his wingtip a scant five yards clear as he swept by, Rod stared in puzzled dismay.

No one was in the cockpit! Below, he thought he saw a parachute.

"He outguessed me!" Rod exclaimed to himself. "Glory-to-grandma! When I flew off he surmised what I meant to do and dropped in a seat-pack 'chute. I know he didn't wear a back pack when he was getting the machine started."

It seemed a futile move.

"I can't see what he gains, sacrificing his ship. It is bound to crash soon. And Ren only goes down into some rocky spot where he won't gain anything. Why did he maroon himself?"

There seemed to be no answer to that, any more than to the multitude of puzzling problems that he had met.

He swung as low as he dared. By and by he located the white glimmer of a billowy smear of crushed silk, far down in a small crease of the hills. He did not dare go lower, could not land.

Going back, he realized that the puzzles were more baffling than ever.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A NAVIGATOR "AVIGATES"

WATCHING Rod take up his pursuit of the auto-gyro, Tim turned to Pat, clutched his arm and hurried him toward the door which Rod had described to them that morning.

"This is the way to get to the radio set," he remarked. "We had better 'go on the air' and tell the American border patrols of California and Texas to be on the lookout for an auto-gyro. Rod might not be able to catch him. You saw how the vanes took the thing up—and how Rod had to circle and climb."

"I think we ought to call on the San Diego station wave, first," Pat remonstrated. "Rod said Teddy was going to get a pilot and bring down a prop for the Jenny—and we ought to find out if his father got the airplane and flew to Los Angeles to hire a rescue 'plane for our Billion Dollar crowd that has been marooned."

"You forgot, Pat. 'Air-rooned!'"

"Push that door and never mind arguing!"

Tim did so. They found the inner cave dark, but the Mexican lieutenant, making a round of

exploration, loaned them his flashlamp until Pat found a set of spare cells to refill the storage electric lamp over the radio panels.

"Maybe we'd better listen first," Tim suggested, studying the dial assembly before him. "Teddy's 'op' last night broke up a message that might have saved a lot of trouble if it had gone through without being jumbled up by him. I mean when the Oakland Queen tried to send her signal to tell us she was being driven down."

Pat agreed that listening was safer than sending to start with.

Tim fussed with the set for a good while. Its circuit was clear to him at a glance; but he had to replace and adjust tuning coils to suit it to the wave lengths he wished to test. Finally he had everything adjusted to his satisfaction.

"Here's San Diego," Tim reported. "Calling. Wait! Hello—San Diego! Hello!"

He paused.

"San Diego says 'Theodore Hawkins flying down vicinity place marked on charts as Lion's Mouth.' He's coming, Pat."

"Bully!" Pat was elated. "He prop-ably has the prop for the Jenny."

"His father is asking if he has arrived—wait! Hello, San Diego. Teddy Hawkins not here yet. Will report arrival. Any other news?"

He gave the customary call formula.

"Come in!"

"I'm 'in'!" exclaimed a third youth. Teddy pushed past the soldier who had conducted him to the pass, through it and into the cave.

"Hello—hello—San Diego. Stand by!" Tim called into his transmitter mouthpiece. "Hello, Ted. Here's your father. Speak to him."

The conversation occupied a minute or so. Then Teddy cut the wave and, thanking Tim, reported that with a pilot he had come, setting down as Rod had instructed, in the larger plateau where soldiers had made him identify himself, and had brought him in.

"How about Pat and I going with my pilot to put the propeller I brought onto the Jenny?" he suggested.

"Wait!" Tim urged. "I'm listening for something. I set at five meters—" he began tuning with a compensating tuner, cutting out some side-band interference.

"Keep still," he prompted, "I'm getting a call—a weak one!"

They waited silently, expectantly, for a report.

"All right. Tim Kelly speaking, Mr. Ellis! Where are you and what happened? Come in!"

After some further exchanges he summed up his news.

"Mr. Ellis was talking," he told Pat and

Teddy. "He and Mr. Stedman have been taking turns, calling, all afternoon."

"Where are they?" demanded Pat.

"Down! Out of fuel! Joe or somebody else must have drilled a hole in one of the tanks."

"Then Joe was with them!" Teddy exclaimed.

"Yes," Tim reported. "Mr. Ellis says they were on board, when the attack came, at daybreak. He was in the 'coop' forward, adjusting the feed of the fuel mixture to the starboard engine. Mr. Stedman and Joe were in the pilots' cabin, warming up the power plant. Joe or the other one got excited or didn't know Mr. Ellis was up forward and they flew away."

"Then Joe—and Stedman—are mixed up ——"

"In this? One of them must be—Joe!" Tim agreed. "This is what happened: Mr. Ellis got back to the cabin on the underbody catwalk and he faced them with trying to run off; but Mr. Stedman stuck to it that he had agreed to take off to save the ship from possible destruction by the bandits. Then he suggested that they ought to go on to Mexico City and be sure that Nelse was there with the duplicate ship."

"But he had radioed——"

"Don't argue, Tim. Mr. Ellis was afraid that the man we call Ren might have sent out false messages. He told me that the Oakland Queen

did not send out any distress call last night—when Ted's 'op' friend interfered with our reception. That might have come from the gorge—so they went to Mexico City."

"And what did they find?" Teddy demanded, breathlessly.

"They found—the duplicate ship, and the ten hired men in frock coats and silk hats—deserted!"

"Who had brought them there?"

"The—pilot—who—had—brought—that duplicate ship—to field eleven."

"But that couldn't be! He had turned the ship over to Nelse——"

"Teddy, all we have to bank on is what was caught by air waves," Tim said soberly. "Ren could have sent out all the messages! We are so mixed up I declare I don't know but what this message we just got might have come from Ren—or Joe—on the other ship—the duplicate!"

"I don't see how," exclaimed Pat, "Joe was on the Oakland Queen!"

"Only till they landed in Mexico City," Tim declared. "There he deserted the Oakland Queen, Mr. Ellis says. They were busy making inquiries, and all at once the duplicate ship got going, and by the time Mr. Ellis and Mr. Stedman got out on the field, they saw it go aloft—and Joe was gone!"

"Then Joe is the real culprit—with Ren!"

"I think so, Pat. But we can't bother with arguments, now. The Oakland Queen is out of fuel, set down, and he gave me the longitude and the latitude. Look-you, we know that an auto-gyro took off from the cliff here in the gorge. So that means fuel may be hidden there, too! And if there is fuel, Pat, you and I must fly with some of it to the Oakland Queen!"

Pat was all excitement.

"We certainly must!" He hurried to find the soldiers, to discover what they knew about the hidden stores. Yes, he learned that there was gas. They could fuel up the Jenny, and fly to the rescue of the Oakland Queen.

"You get the gas aboard," Tim urged his brother. "I'll work out our flight. You've got your compass. We'll make it!"

"I'll stick by the radio," Teddy told them. "I can help best that way I think." Tim agreed, and hastened to help the soldiers adjust the new propeller and its hub on the Jenny, while Teddy used the headset in the cave and Pat superintended the assembling and loading of fuel.

Half an hour passed: then the Jenny took the air!

CHAPTER XXIX

"AVIGATION OR DEAD RECKONING?"

FLYING back, Rodney decided to tune in the small, compact, receiving set on the Express high-wing's instrument board.

Knowing the wave lengths almost by heart he had no difficulty in catching a good many ship wireless calls, as he gradually worked up from the very shortest into the somewhat longer waves.

In one channel he caught part of the conversation between the air liner and Tim.

With full gun he drove for the larger plateau and landed with his underbody lights on.

Hurrying in, he found Teddy at the receiving set in the gorge.

"I hurried in as soon as I got the news the Oakland Queen is down," Rod panted after his run through the no-longer-secret pass.

"You won't be needed," Teddy stated. "Tim and Pat took off in the Jenny, with five cans of gas."

"Took off! Tim—and Pat! In the Jenny!"

"Right-o!"

"But——"

"Oh, Tim knows something about navigation —and Pat knows 'avigation' because he has a compass!" Ted snickered at the idea, not fully aware of the cause for Rod's seriousness.

"Ted! You don't mean to say you let them go! You're seventeen. Why don't you use your head?"

"I do thank you!" Ted was a trifle hurt. "Pat had his Scout compass and he knows it is pretty nearly accurate! They got a brand new propeller on the Jenny!"

"But — glory-to-grandma!" Rodney was aghast, "Tim knows only the barest outlines of how to fly without beacons or airway lights, and in daytime." Rodney was worried. Ted did not quite see why.

"They got down here in fine shape."

"That was in the Express 'plane that Tim has flown before. Besides, they had a charted course, with airway lights as far as San Diego, and the rockets guided them when they would have been lost without them."

"They got the exact location of the air liner!" Ted spoke defensively, feeling a qualm that his own slight knowledge of intricate flying problems had permitted the fifteen-year-old twins to dash off in the dark on a blind flight.

"Location!" Rod scoffed. "Listen, Teddy—

that new propeller may have more 'torque' than the old one. It may keep swinging the nose to one side. Pat will correct the course with his compass—oh, yes! But what does he know about correction for compass deviation in different places. The compass may not guide them within ten miles of the air liner for all their 'exact location!' "

"I'm sorry!" Ted was contrite.

"It wasn't exactly your fault." Rod was generous. "But, anyway, I guess you had better stick close to the dials of that set. I'll see if I can catch them. I'll work out the course as soon as I get the Express in the air again. You contact the air liner, and keep listening. I'll tune in my receiver every so often, and on the even quarter hour you send out any news you've collected!"

Rodney hastened back to the high-wing. Some of the group of marooned "rich men" volunteered to bring down additional gas, and while they worked, Rodney used his knowledge to try, if possible, to rescue both the air liner and his two impulsive chums from their difficulties.

With all their arguments about the respective merits of two terms, he knew that Tim and Pat were really flying their course by what the captain of a seagoing vessel would call "dead reckoning."

With nothing more than a small compass, a set of latitude and longitude points of intersection, and the supreme confidence of ignorance, Tim and Pat were flying out into a hilly country, knowing—unless they had forgotten it—that the air liner had been lost in fog.

"They don't know the weather," Rod murmured, as he worked. "They haven't the least idea what the visibility may be over the locality they are trying to head for. They have no wind velocity to guide the correction of wind-drift. They don't know their speed. And when they get to that intersection point given by the liner —how will they know it?"

Busily he secured from the chart pocket in the Express all the marked charts touching lower California, the Texas border of Mexico and the locality South of those.

While Ted, on his instruction, tuned in Oakland and called for weather, wind and visibility reports, Rod sat beside him, working out the many mathematical problems that Tim and Pat had not thought about.

"You see," he explained to Ted in an interval, after the available flying data, meagre enough, had been tabulated for him, "you see, Ted, 'navigation' means more than flying a compass course. Lindbergh had the right idea. His motto was 'preparedness.' He took account of

every possible factor before he took off. He got everything worked out as closely as human skill, perfect instruments and precision would allow. When he took off, he had foreseen as many emergencies and possibilities as anyone could. He had prepared as well as he could to meet them. He knew his line of flight. He knew his speed. He knew, as well as the cooperation of every weather bureau would let him, the conditions he must meet. Consequently, he got there!"

Rodney checked the tabulated information, made some simple but careful mathematical calculations, and then plotted his line of flight.

"This is the best chart we have for the ground I must cover," he remarked, securing the paper with pins so that he could plot out the different points.

"Why do you say 'chart?' That's a map, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's a map," Rod agreed, "but a 'chart' has the landmarks, as you see, and the elevation of different hills, above sea level. Before I take off I will set my altimeter to correct for the difference between the sea level and the land level average. We do that in an emergency flight like this one, with high peaks to top. If I didn't correct for the difference between land level and sea level, I might have two thousand

feet on my altimeter dial, indicated as my height, but there might be a peak just a hundred feet higher. I'd have to stop watching instruments and do a lot of figuring—sea level might be that hundred feet lower than the land level. I'd think I was a couple of thousand feet above the earth, but I'd be only a thousand and nine hundred—maybe less—above earth level, and I'd smack into that peak before I'd know it."

He laid out the direct airline between the point of departure and the intersection of latitude and longitude given him by Ted.

From this line he laid off the triangle that represented the degree that the wind might drift him away from the straight flight line.

Laying out the mileage he must cover over land, plus the added mileage put on by the tendency of the wind to drift him further to the North-East, in the altitude he had selected as the best wind and weather height, Rod calculated the air speed he must count on, to help his engine, and the air-miles he must fly to make the mileage on the earth's surface that he knew must be covered.

He figured out compass deviation for that position on the earth, estimated the gas he would use up going and returning, with a generous margin for scouting and deviations caused by unforeseen complications, and com-

pleted other essential calculations. Ted sat frowning.

"Goodness!" Ted grumbled, "they got the compass direction, did Pat and Tim, and they set off. They'll probably set down before you get started."

"Maybe they will," agreed Rodney. "They probably will set down. Not very close to the air liner, unless Tim has the luck of the Irish! But when I take off, I think I'll come fairly close to going where I start for, getting there, and getting back!"

Then, and not till he was fully prepared, Rodney took off to prove the superiority of calculation and preparation over hasty and impulsive "blind reckoning."

And Ted waited by the radio for the result!

CHAPTER XXX

AERIAL "BLIND MAN'S BUFF"

"JUST a bit more right rudder," Pat spoke through the tube of the Gossport helmet to Tim. He had taken it from the Express.

The needle of the small compass in Pat's hand shook, quivering to right and left; then it settled with only slight shudders caused by the vibration of the airplane.

"Hold her! That's the ticket. Brother mine, that's avigation!"

A chuckle came to Tim's ears.

"Tim," Pat's voice was full of amusement, "maybe we are playing a game of blind man's buff in the air, with fog under us and nothing but this compass for a guide. But every fog has a silvery top in moonlight and the silver on this one is that I can say 'avigation' and the noise of the Liberty won't let you argue!"

Tim scowled. That was no time for foolery, he felt.

Tim was by no means as confident, after an hour of flying in the strange little ship, as he had been at the take off.

It might be all very well, he reflected, to start out with latitude and longitude all clear, and with a fairly dependable little compass to steer by. It might be very well. Then, again—they were over peaks, some of which poked their inquisitive heads above the blanket of murk, hinting that others might be just beneath it. Flying above the fog enabled the twins to avoid the ones they could see, but it did not help them to discover their objective, the defuled air liner!

"Aerial blind man's buff!" Pat liked his idea. "That's what this is. And the mystery we are mixed up in is just like our flying, Timmy!"

Tim nodded.

"Yes, it is," Pat spoke on. "We started this hop with big notions of flying straight to the Queen, with heroes' medals waiting for us. We flew into a mystery with one little puzzle, about the deflected compass, and thought that because we said 'Sky Scouts to the Rescue' we could protect Mr. Ellis, save him from his enemies and his temptations, and be proud of ourselves."

Tim nodded once more, though a serious, troubled wrinkle gathered across his forehead. He did not like the sound of the Liberty's pulsations. They did not seem to have the former tone of power. He thought of the concealed

peaks beneath the blanketing fog, and shivered. Well, they would have to go down and take a risk, soon, anyway!

They must be nearing the point they had taken off to reach.

No one five thousand feet in the air could find an airplane resting on earth. They must go into the fog.

"Well," Pat expanded his notion, about the similarity of their hop to the confusion of the problem they had not solved. "We think we are coming to the right spot, but we don't know, while we fly. And we think we know the real culprit in the Wall Street 'bears' mystery, but we are just as liable to find we are miles out on that as we are to dive into the mist and find we don't know whether we are where we think we are or where we thought we wouldn't be!"

Tim, listening because he had to, shook his head curtly and put his finger on his lips. He had other things to occupy his attention: no whimsical parallels of flight and mystery were needed to furnish food for thought. That engine wasn't behaving properly.

The tiny pilot light on his instrument panel seemed dim.

A cold shudder ran through Tim.

If their battery was weakening!—and that seemed to be the cause for the dimming of the

small bulb, he thought—they were in serious danger.

"What's the matter?" Pat asked, through his tube. "Don't tell me Teddy's 'Crazy Jenny' has picked this time and place to 'act up!'"

Tim nodded. He pointed a finger toward the dimming bulb.

"You don't need the light," Pat tried to reassure him, not comprehending. He began to rummage in a pocket in the cockpit, seaching for the spare replacement bulb that he had seen there.

Finding it he passed it forward.

Tim nodded, gratefully. At least the new bulb would show him if the old one was only burning out or if his fears were justified.

The new bulb was only a trifle brighter.

"It's the battery!" Pat decided, and himself began to feel uneasy. An old engine and a strange airplane flying over hilly terrain that cloaked its dangers under a thick mist was no pleasant thing to face.

To add the menace of a weakened spark, destroying the engine's dependability was even worse.

The Liberty missed several firing points, then revved on again.

Tim pointed downward.

"Yes, we'd better begin to get down where

we can see the liner's beacon fire," Pat remarked, trying to keep his voice calm as it went to his twin's ears.

Tim, inwardly glad that Pat did not realize the truth, as Pat's steady tones indicated, nodded and cut the engine to idling speed. He switched off the flying lights and the panel pilot lamp.

Perhaps, he mused, a rest might allow the battery to come up a bit: in his radio experience he had sometimes found that after a brief rest the small cells of a battery "picked up" for a short time. They must conserve what strength the battery still reserved.

They went into the mist in a long, gentle glide. Both strained their eyes as they went down through the damp blanket.

"We don't want to smack up against a mountain if we can see it first," Pat muttered, and Tim nodded, unseen in the dark black murk.

The fog did not give up its warning secrets.

Sheer and dark, the tip of a peak loomed ahead.

"Tim!"

At the same instant that Pat gave his warning shout, nearly deafening the youthful pilot, Tim dipped ailerons, side-slipping.

He pushed forward his throttle, correcting and also kicking rudder as the ailerons brought

the ship to a level, with the Liberty picking up and helping their flying speed to bring them safely out of the slip with the left wing ten feet clear of the rocks as they dived and then leveled, once more safe, but sadly shaken by the close approach of disaster.

There was nothing to do about it.

They must fly on.

Once more Tim cut the gun, idling his engine, finding the lowest gliding angle he dared to use.

"That wasn't so bad," Pat stated into the tube of the Gossport. "You're getting to be a real avi—no, Tim, I won't tease. I'll call you a navigator after that!"

Tim smiled grimly.

What lay ahead? He peered anxiously.

"Do I see a light?" Pat questioned. "There, off toward the starboard and just ahead of wingtip."

Tim snatched his eyes away from the nose for an instant.

"I do believe we have av—navigated properly, after all," Pat was exultant. "That's a fire, and a fire in these lonesome hills must mean a beacon, a signal. Swing that way, Tim. We've passed the shoulder of the hill or we couldn't see the fire through the fog."

They had avoided the hill, were flying steadily

lower over what promised to be some fairly level place, a valley, probably, between two small ranges of the mountain chain.

Straight for the huge spot of illuminated mist Tim set the nose, nursing his engine with short spurts of the gun to keep it clear, and with each spurt leveling a trifle more, to avoid assuming the angle of a power glide. He did not want to go in very fast.

They went lower and still closer to earth with every second.

That was a huge bonfire, evidently prepared for in advance, Tim decided. In that isolated spot wood was not gathered so easily.

"Can it be something on fire?" Pat questioned. "It certainly is a big blaze."

Tim did not respond. He changed the flight line a trifle, to go past the glowing aura the first time.

As they swept by they saw, from a thousand feet up, that there were no large obstructions lighted by the glow. They circled, widely because of the strangeness of the ship's control to Tim and his desire not to risk too sharp a bank. Coming in, lower and lower, the Jenny gave up her power plant as the spark became too weak to fire the charges sucked into the Liberty's cylinders. But they made a fair landing.

Running down a bumpy spot and stopping

with one landing wheel badly strained by the difficulty of landing level on unknown terrain, the small ship stopped, one wing on earth, her new propeller turning its last revolution as Tim, cutting the useless switch out, began to climb out past the wings.

Pat was a close second.

They ran toward the fire—drew up—hesitated—looked at each other through the glistening, fire lighted mist, and gaped.

A single man, waving his arms wildly, stood by the fire.

From the air above came the drone of powerful motors — a huge shape became faintly, whitely, eerily visible, like a ghost of an aircraft looming through the murk.

"Look alive, there!" shouted Ren, rushing to drag the small ship out of the clearway. "Get this crate off the clearway!"

"That's the Oakland Queen, coming in!" Pat gasped. "Yes—she needs all the landing room there is!"

"Oakland Queen?" Ren laughed harshly, "this isn't the Queen—it's the twin that Ellis doped and painted up to try to fool others with."

"Oh!" exclaimed Tim. "Then we can see Joe!"

"Yes!" snapped Ren, "but get out of the way now!"

As the large airplane made its inspection while its pilot selected the most suitable point to approach from, guided by green flare approach signals and several white runway marking flares, Tim turned to Pat with a little laugh.

"Avigation or navigation," he chuckled, "I won't argue; I agree with you on one thing else, too. You said we were playing aerial blind man's buff—and you were right. We started, blind, to find an air liner. Instead we got lost, and then we found Ren who is lost. Now, instead of the Oakland Queen, here comes the duplicate ship, to find us."

"What I'm thinking about," Pat stated, "my worry is this: Who is back of the scheme to maroon the millionaires and profit by letting the bears of Wall Street drive down their stock. Does it mean anything to our mystery to have Ren build a signal fire and see Joe or Henry bring his substitute ship here?"

"It means!—" Tim gripped his twin by the arm, "it means, Pat, that Joe is the other half of the team of 'Ren and Joe!' Or Henry—Ren and Hen will now put on the great aviation stunt of flying away together, leaving Tim and Pat deserted, the Oakland Queen helpless, Rod missing, Teddy helpless, and ten rich men abandoned in the Lion's throat."

"Is that so?" Pat had lost his usual indolent manner. "My program says, 'Great Capture of Ren and Hen by superior skill and strategy of Tim and Pat—with fireworks!' "

CHAPTER XXXI

WITH COMPASS AND RADIO

"Notice those approach flares," said Pat, close to his brother's ear. "Now, look at my compass. Then look at the smoke from the fire."

"I see what you mean, Pat. The smoke blows North of East. The green lights are up that way. The wind must be faced by the ship, as it comes in. And—" he caught Pat's idea quickly, "that will put the door to the cabin on the side away—from—the—light!"

Pat nodded.

"Henry or Joe will set down, and Ren will get aboard and they will take off, without us if they can. Ren plans that. You saw the way he looked at us just now, when he grabbed the Jenny's fuselage. The way he yanked on the flippers shows that Ren isn't an aviator and knows very little about airplanes."

"You see it! He doesn't know that the door of the false Oakland Queen is on the side that will be away from the fire. See! He's standing by the beacon."

"Football!"

"Right!"

"Then let's get over before the ship comes down!"

"Get out of the clearway!" Ren yelled at them.

They pretended to be confused. He started forward. Tim dragged Pat aside. The ship was coming down.

They were beyond the runway clearance.

"Couldn't be better!" laughed Tim, exultingly. "Stand by, Pat!"

"You make the tackle!"

"I will!"

They saw the great, white shape slant down, level off and touch the somewhat uneven ground, some distance below the fire, and taxi on.

In its shadow they raced along, losing ground against its speed at first, but managing to keep up as it slowed.

Running out of speed with sufficient way ahead to enable it to gain take-off speed before reaching the far end of the field, where Ren had set a small obstacle lantern of red, Tim and Pat saw the ship rev down its propellers.

"Hurry! Before Ren gets around the tail!"

Pat needed no prompting from his brother. As fast as his shorter legs would go he raced

along, catching up with Tim just as Ren came pounding around the tail.

"Here, you!" Ren snarled, seeing them, "get away from that step!"

"Aren't you going to take us?" cried Tim, between panting breaths. Ren snarled a negative. "Use the other crate!"

"But you strained the flippers the way you grabbed them!" remonstrated Tim, apparently overwhelmed with dismay.

"Fix it!"

"Come on, Pat!" cried Tim, starting down toward the tail, as if to pass Ren, and give the menacing long arms a wide berth.

"No! Under the body," shouted Pat. "It's quicker!"

He bent his legs and started as if to scramble beneath the forward bulge of the cabin.

Tim swerved suddenly.

A cleaner, more perfect football tackle had never been seen in a Mexican hill plateau.

Ren went down with a grunt of astonishment.

"Here! Ren! What's up?"

The cabin door slid open. An indistinct form leaned out.

"Help—Pat!" cried Tim, wrestling for all he was worth, trying to keep gripping hands from reaching his windpipe. He had the agility of a cat; but against the strength of the tall, sinewy

Ren, he had only a small degree of leeway. He was more slippery, more swift; but strength would tell in a few seconds, and he knew it as he fought, desperately, against a desperate adversary.

Pat, to his dismay, did not arrive.

From the doorway a figure leaped. Straight out, ignoring the step, it sprang to land on the grass.

Its legs were caught.

Overbalanced, down went the figure.

"Thought you'd do that!" grunted Pat, clinging like a leech as the astonished person tried to free the grip on a leg.

Pat had not gone under the cabin; he had, instead, crouched low, close to the step, where he could obstruct the exit of the pilot.

His ruse had succeeded.

"Pa—Pat!—He—cho—me!"

Pat realized that there was no time for the niceties of battle.

With all the strength he had, he drove his body forward at the same instant that he released the kicking leg. Before the body rolled over to spring erect, Pat was at its head. All the force of his momentum, and the released force of muscles healthily trained in spite of his indolence in other matters, brought his fist

against a cheek high enough to graze the temple.

"Ugh—ff!"

The form relaxed.

Pat scrambled from the fall his momentum had carried him into.

Swiftly he covered the distance to the wiggling, rolling bodies that had gone under the fuselage.

He caught at the wrist that held its grip on Tim's windpipe.

His foot dug sharply, stunningly, into ribs.

With a grunt of pain the man under the fuselage, near the tail, relaxed his hold to thrust off his new adversary.

A sharp contact—a stifled cry of pain! Pat breathed more freely.

Fortune, Fate, or that Hand stretched forth to aid the deserving in a crisis, had caused Ren to forget, if he realized, his position under the airplane body.

Sitting up sharply, his head had come in contact with the heavy, steel-alloy tubing of the underbody bracing.

Its streamlined edge, almost sharp, caught him just back of his ear.

With a cry that ended in a groan he slumped over on his side.

Pat was bending over Tim in an instant.

Drawing in gulping breaths, Tim reassured Pat as he rolled out from under the body.

"A'—ri'—Pat!"

"Take it easy. He won't bother you. Not for awhile."

Pat raced back to the other adversary. Coming to himself, and seeing that there were two to take account of, the man Pat had struck scuffled to his feet, unsteady and weaving about as he half ran, half tottered to the step. There, in the dark, Pat again tackled him; but when he discovered that he could not lash out his pinioned legs against the dragging, dead weight of Pat's heavy body, the adversary began by sheer strength of his arms to crawl up into the dark cabin.

"He is after a—gun, maybe!" muttered Pat, clinging grimly.

He hoped Tim would be all right. He trusted that the blow on the ear would keep Ren out of the conflict. If he could cling until they got into the cabin, Pat thought, he might be able to catch hold of one of the small bottles full of compressed air that were stored under cabin seats for use to fill the life-belts provided for passengers in case of emergency.

Such safeguards were more usual on amphibian craft, flying over and on water; however, as Pat knew, Mr. Ellis had equipped his liners

with the extra safeguard because they might be carried in fog out over the Pacific or the Gulf of Mexico, on a flight.

The man achieved the cabin passage by dragging with strong arms, and Pat, his clothes ripped on his chest and stomach by the step, held those flailing legs doggedly.

Tim, recovering a trifle of his strength, recalled that he had a length of very stout twine in his pocket.

He must render his attacker incompetent to make further trouble, without delay—and get to Pat!

Swiftly Tim rove several turns of the cord around the tail-skid bracing, ran it in a tight loop around an outflung wrist of Ren's prone, inert body, cut it after tying a good knot, bound the remaining length of cord around one ankle, and dragging it taut, was able to make it reach and fasten around an upper strut.

Not a moment too soon did Tim complete his work. Ren, recovering his senses, found himself with one hand, above his head, held by the stout cord, with a leg extended sidewise and partly lifted.

In that position he could not roll, he could not get a purchase on anything to try to snap the cord.

Tim found Pat locked in a wrestling embrace

with a muttering, deadly antagonist; but with his reinforcement Pat was soon free.

"Throw him in the lavatory compartment!" urged Tim. "It has a good, strongly braced wall, because it's where the side ribs come down —he can't smash through either side, there. You can get the revolver out of the Jenny and stand guard!" Tim mentioned a firearm that did not exist; Pat agreed to the pretence, they dragged the temporarily helpless captive to the small compartment at the back of the cabin, shut the door, and then, with stern threats, kept up a brisk conversation, Pat just outside the door, Tim really going to secure Ren with more cord secured from Pat's pockets.

To the man in the small room, unable to see, but able to hear them, Tim and Pat judged that their ruse must be convincing.

"Did you say the gun was in the front place?" cried Tim, outside; but all the time he was deftly trussing Ren's legs and hands, freeing him from the tail skid and strut, but making his new bonds secure.

"In the log pocket!" Pat called from the cabin.

"Oh! Here it is! I'm coming!"

Ren spoke quietly.

"I'll go peaceably," he muttered. "You've got this thing all wrong, young fellow; but

there's no use in my fighting against odds. Give me leeway enough around my ankles to hobble, and I'll make no trouble."

"You'd better not!" Tim warned, loosening the loop, but clinging to an end in such a way that the first move he considered dangerous from Ren could be frustrated by a pull at the line that would throw him on his face again.

Ren made no effort to escape. Painfully he climbed into the cabin, with Pat's help. He slumped into a seat. Pat pretended to accept the pretended weapon from Tim, and with a warning to their unseen prisoner to keep still or be shot, Pat mounted guard again.

"Now, what?" asked Pat.

"I think we'll have to get the radio going, and find out what Ted has to say." Tim went to the set on the instrument board, tuned in and listened intently.

"Here's Ted!" he exclaimed after a little waiting. "He says he has heard from his father, who is flying down, after all, with a relief ship to rescue our Billion Dollar crowd—but it's funny that we got word that the Oakland Queen was down."

"Why?"

"Because the Oakland Queen has just reached San Diego—from Mexico City."

"San Diego? The Oakland Queen?" Pat was stunned. "She's lost!"

"She can't be. Mr. Hawkins——"

"But you *heard* Mr. Ellis——"

"And Ted says his father *saw* him. In San Diego!"

Pat stared.

"But—why! Rod's off on a wild goose chase!"

"Yes; but we're not. We may have played blind man's buff in a fog but it brought us to at least one good thing! We've got Ren—and Joe or Henry!"

"It can't be Henry." Tim's wits began to work. "He had another ship."

"But Nelse had this one!"

A voice came muffled through the door of the rear compartment.

"Yeah!" it growled, "Nelse had it—till I deserted the Queen and got away with this one! Is Ren there?"

"Yes! I'm tied up, too."

The voice seemed to be amused.

"Well," it came to the listening chums, "let these kids fly us back. I forgot a paper, anyhow! It incriminates me—Henry fixed it up and I forgot it, last time I was in the Lion's jaws."

"Be still!" snapped Pat. "And don't forget you are 'covered.' If any papers are to be located, we'll take care of it."

"Oh! All right."

"How will you get back?" asked Ren. Tim looked baffled. "I'll see what Ted says," he stated.

Ted had a good idea. Rod was lost. He had a receiver, but no sending outfit. But the duplicate ship had a sender. If Rod could make his receiver 'whistle' a signal, as old radio circuits often could be made to do, perhaps the strong amplifiers Ted had at the gorge could pick up the signal. His directional aerial would help locate its source. By getting the directions, miles and so on, they might work out a line of flight that would get Rod to the twins.

If Rod could locate their light, get into the plateau, he could fly the big ship home, to the plateau near the bandits' gorge, with Pat guarding the prisoners, while Tim could trail him in the Jenny.

It was a situation that called for precise figuring and for careful manipulation of the things they had to work with.

Teddy, a deep student of radio technique, took full advantage of the splendid equipment in his temporary possession.

Pat's compass and the sending set and charts they had, enabled them to relate their own position in the only large valley of the range they were in, to the position Rod occupied.

After much calculation and testing, Rod's "heterodyne whistle" came in, and with his experience and mathematical skill Teddy made his estimates.

"Can you build up that beacon, and keep it for half an hour?" Ted's voice came to Tim.

"Yes!" Tim informed him that Ren's preparations, evidently made in advance, included plenty of wood for the beacon.

"Then Rod flies North-by-North-East, between thirty and forty miles, and circles, low, till he picks up your lights," Teddy gave his broadcast carefully.

There were long minutes of suspense, although Tim had plenty to do to keep the fire up.

In thirty-seven minutes from the estimated time of Rod's take off his engine roared into the light of the beacon, Tim's landing guides enabled him to set down, and he took charge.

With Tim trailing in the Express—they deserted the Jenny till it could be ferried in later—with Pat guarding the closed compartment and Ren well bound in the cabin passage, Rod

could fly the big stubstitute liner to a safe landing.

Compass, radio—and brains!—had saved the situation!

CHAPTER XXXII

REN DISPERSES THE FOG

FLYING carefully, high above the clouds of mist which a freshing wind began to scatter, Rodney gave a great deal of thought to his many problems.

His father had not been exonerated fully: and that rankled.

"Why," he pondered, "if he was innocent, why did he do so many queer things? I can't see how, by any accident I can think of, he came to be on the Oakland Queen, just by mere chance, when it deserted the millionaires. Of course there must be an explanation! But I wish —I wish Dad had not gone away to Mexico City. And why did he radio that they were lost in the hills, and turn up in San Diego?"

A sickening fear that there was something wrong about his father's part in the mystery kept growing on Rod.

Could Hawk really have falsified the situation? He had said "coupe" and "contact," of course! Those words, according to Ren, were a clue to the real culprit. But then—and Rod

admitted it sorrowfully, and reluctantly to himself—his father had been a war-time flyer and might use those terms sometimes—yes! he had heard him say "contact!" on several occasions.

"But we've caught Ren, after he tried to escape; and Joe met him, to escape with him in this big ship," Rod tried to reassure his nagging mind. "They would have gone to Honduras where the extradition laws wouldn't hold them for return to America."

Again, he mused, Hawk might be the real culprit, after all, and Ren might have been trying to escape punishment for his smuggling activity; by radio he might have bribed Joe to meet him. Joe might have left the ten substitute "millionaires" in Mexico City while he picked up a good bit of "side money" for taking Ren to safety.

"In that case," he thought, "Dad might have flown the Queen to meet Nelse, after the radio message from him saying he was flying on. He might have missed him because Joe was going to get Ren. Then Dad and Mr. Stedman might have decided to take the men back to American territory so they could go on to San Francisco."

The conclusion inspired him with new hope.

"Guess you can't make head or tail of this business," Ren spoke from his position, well bound and prone on the cabin flooring.

"Can you?" asked Rod, throttling down the roaring engines; one proof that they were not in the real Oakland Queen came from the difficulty of talking without shouting.

Pat helped Ren, at his request, to a chair, close behind Rod's flying seat.

"Yes," Ren answered Rod's challenge, "I can straighten it all out and clear up the fog you boys have got us all into by your 'messing-in' on matters that don't concern you!"

"Oh—don't they, though!" exclaimed Pat.

Pat, tiptoeing closer, listened with one eye toward the braced door behind which the second prisoner still kept silence.

"If you had kept out of things," Ren snapped, "we'd have had the real evil-doers."

"We've got them!" asserted Rod, meaningly.

"Instead, you have rounded up a secret service operative and the man who would cheerfully give his life for Rodney's father!"

"Is that so?"

Ren favored Pat with a frown.

"Yes, that's so!" he retorted. "When we get back to the soldiers, my papers and the Lieutenant will pretty quickly convince you!"

"Then why did you try to get away in the auto-gyro?" demanded Rod.

"That was Joe."

"Why couldn't you tell us?" Rod was scep-

tical. "We'd have flown you anywhere, to help the cause of justice!"

"I preferred to use you to help bring the soldiers! And I admit that you did help there. By the way, it may help you to trust me more if I mention this to you: why didn't the Lieutenant rush in and arrest me at once?"

They could not find any logical refutation of that reminder.

"You'll see," Ren declared. "You've simply delayed your own best interests."

They did not have anything to say to that.

"You see," Ren became confidential, "I was working on the matter of the smugglers who ran Chinese and Japanese into the United States. I contrived to lose myself in the Mexican hills, to be discovered by the rather blunder-headed Mex, half-breed who headed the band. We had to get evidence on them before the Mexican authorities would co-operate with Washington. They took me to the gorge, half starved, and then——"

He made a gesture with his close-bound hands.

"——They found out that I could use my brains to aid their work. Posing as an adventurer and a renegade, I showed them how a fine radio would enable me to communicate with a portable station on the border. In reality I

used the set to make contact with the Border Patrol, and so, each time they ran in a group of the foreigners, our Patrol knew about it, and caught the newcomers, deported them and quietly put the runners in custody. In that way the band was gradually depleted from time to time, while I got the proof through the various red-tape delays in Washington and Mexico City, and had the soldiers despatched."

Pat saw that Rodney seemed convinced of the genuineness of the recital. They waited without comment.

"It was while I waited for the soldiers that I tuned in on other stuff that came over the air," Ren went on. "I picked up some mysterious communications while I tried to find the headquarters on the American side. I got the autogyro sent down and hid it on the pretext that in it I could fly the Chinese over the heads of the patrols. My real purpose was to use it to try to find the place on the Texas side where the brains of the smuggling outfit resided; I saw that the man in the Lion's Mouth wasn't clever enough to get in out of the rain."

The mysterious calls he picked up, he told them, interested him and helped to while away his time as he waited for developments from the Capitol and from Mexico City.

"I learned, from one message, that a man

named Ellis was communicating with a subaltern called Hank, or Henry. I thought they might be involved in the smuggling scheme, but I soon learned that they were discussing some transaction in which a man referred to as 'L. S.' was involved. There was a chap called Hawkins in it, too—and what was my surprise when I was approached, one evening, by radio, with a proposal that I could hold a certain set of rich men, for ransom, and make a big lot of money!"

Trying to discover how the caller over the air knew about him and about the band, he told Rod and Pat, Ren had come to the conclusion that they refused to tell him—because they were the real heads of the smuggling enterprise.

"Otherwise," he remarked, "how would they know of me? They did! So, in order to corral them, to get them into the open, I agreed that if a ship set down I would hold its passengers."

"The call from 'Joe' saying he was 'Nelse,' this morning, helped!" suggested Rod, with a meaning look toward the closed door. "It got the people excited so that your band captured them with no trouble at all, eh?"

"The call from 'Nelse' came close to spoiling everything!" retorted Ren. "The air liner got away. I wanted the three on that ship more than I wanted the passengers. But they es-

caped. So, when you came along and interfered, hurrying my plans, I thought I could get away and meet that chap called Joe, and use him to lead me to Ellis, Hawkins, Joe, Henry and Stedman—all or any of them! But you have spoiled that now. So—I've got a few dumb half-breeds—but not the ringleaders of the smuggling outfit!"

The youths were silent.

"See what meddling does!" remarked Ren.

"What do you know about the Wall Street scheme?" asked Rod. He knew that his father and the others must me innocent of any contact with the bandits: perhaps Ren could give him some clue on the other matter.

"There isn't any difficulty about that," Ren answered. "Ellis and Stedman, or Ellis and Hawkins, or Ellis and Joe—or Stedman and Joe—take your pick!—got the rich men into the Mexican hills. I helped, trying to solve my own problem about the smugglers. Then the conspirators flew to Mexico City, or perhaps to Los Angeles, placed their stock-selling orders, ran the Wall Street prices away down, and then rebought the stock they had sold 'short' before —at a big saving.

"I don't doubt," he spoke directly to Rodney, "that you will go back to a very affluent father,

my lad. And I—" he made a rueful face, "—I will go back to do my work all over again, if and when the smuggling starts up again!"

They felt a little sorry about their part in spoiling his plans.

They came closer to the end of the flight, dropping low. The fog was well dispersed, there, and Rod caught the beacon flares on the plateau landing place. He circled around a number of times, however, manipulating his flying lights as a signal of distress.

"What are you doing that for?" demanded Ren.

"Oh—just—er—nothing!" said Rod, lamely.

"But you must have some reason!" Pat insisted. "If you're signaling to Tim, he's landed. He set down the Express while you were circling."

"I thought it would be best for him to go in first," Rod agreed. "They can get his lighter airplane out of our way quicker than they could get us out of his way—and we want to have everything fixed for the reception to our prisoners."

"Well, he's out of the way. There's a green flare!"

"Then I'll shoot the field and go in."

He did.

"Come out!" Pat approached the door to the lavatory. "Joe—come on!"

He pushed the door; it did not yield.

"Rod!" Pat shouted, as Rod was on the point of cutting the ignition, "the door's bolted on the inside."

Rod left his work unfinished, rushed to Pat's aid. Between them they broke through the light bolt. The cabin lights showed an empty room.

Through its rear partition, of light wood covered with varnished fabric, was a large, roughly cut hole. Evidently, getting free, the prisoner had taken advantage of the engine noise to cut his way out.

"Now you see why I signaled," Rod commented. "Soldiers have surounded us as soon as we touched ground. If Joe tries to climb out of the trap in the fuselage near the tail, he's caught anyhow!"

"So that's why you signaled and stalled so long!" Pat spoke admiringly; but a shout of dismay came from outside. They dashed to the ground, raced to a group near the tail.

In the underbody, a huge, jagged hole showed where the prisoner had evidently broken through—either before they took off, while the

engines were warmed up—or, in the air, preferring a drop to capture.

"Well," said Pat, consolingly, "we've got Ren if Joe did escape."

But they didn't have Ren—after five minutes.

CHAPTER XXXIII

REVELATIONS

ALMOST on the heels of their discovery that the second prisoner had escaped, Rod, Tim and Pat were confronted by Lieutenant Morcadez, in charge of the Mexican soldiers.

"You have a prisoner, young gentlemen?"

"Yes, sir," Rod answered. "Pat—bring him out, please!"

Pat obeyed.

The lieutenant stared. Ren smiled.

.."*Santissima!*" exclaimed Morcadez, "that is —*senor* Wrenn!"

"Certainly it is!" Rod agreed. "Please take him and put him with the rest of the bandits. As soon as we can refuel the Express, we will fly around until we locate Joe, and you can send soldiers to surround and capture him. We helped to get your smugglers. I know you'll help us to catch the man who drove the air liner down and nearly made it crash in the gorge, and who is working, hand in glove, with Ren, to get a lot of rich Americans in the bandits' clutches!"

"There is some meestake, *senor!*" Morcadez showed surprise. "For the fellow Joe I know not about heem. But—thees—*senor*—he is of your own Government. He work to help us stop that smuggle' of the yellow ones from Mexico to your countree!"

"Thank you, Lieutenant." Ren—or Wrenn, as the officer pronounced the name, almost like Warren—smiled.

Rodney stared. The papers which Wrenn produced, even with their slight knowledge of such matters, appeared to be genuine and certainly were convincing.

The Sky Scouts looked at one another dubiously.

"I guess we have to apologize," Tim said, finally: he made a manly job of it; Pat seconded him, still dazed, but regretful for his roughness.

"I won't hold it against you. Wrenn shook hands all around. "Of course you spoiled my plans. I meant to hold the soldiers back until I could learn just who was at the back of the smuggling band, on the American side; I thought that perhaps, through this Joe who came to me, I would learn the identity of the ringleaders. However—we have bagged the underdogs—as usual!—and the rest can't be helped."

"I don't understand about Joe coming to you," broke in Tim. "What made him come there? How did he know about you?"

"He made a contact with me by radio, first," Wrenn explained. "I have told Rodney how I used to listen in. This chap, Joe, evidently did the same—and picked up some of my secret calls for the smugglers I was trying to lure into the open. At any rate, however he discovered me, Joe flew down in this ship——"

"What?" Tim was amazed. "I thought that Nelse——"

"No! This Joe came in it and camouflaged it on the rocks in a hollow about two nights ago. He said he was a go-between for some of the rich men of the coast, and it would be worth my while to hold some of their enemies here for a few days if he could lure them down to the gorge in some way."

"But how did you manage to escape in the 'gyro if you don't own it? Those ships aren't easy to hande with no experience!" Tim spoke.

"I didn't escape in it! Let me straighten you out." Wrenn leaned against the wheel trucks, lighting a cigarette.

He had come to Mexico, he stated, some years before, on other work for his government, and had heard rumors of the smuggling gang; finally he had been detailed to investigate. He

had disguised in old prospector's garb, pretending to be lost, wandered where the band could discover him, pretended to join them, and showed them how a radio would aid them.

"Really, I used it to keep in touch with my own people and the Mexican authorities," he explained.

"When Joe had come in the night, he had proposed that the bandits hold the Billion Dollar crowd when he lured them there. For reward he offered Wrenn whatever ransom he chose to exact, and the truth about the smugglers' head in America.

"Naturally I agreed," Wrenn added. "He told me that he would so arrange matters that when the Oakland Queen started on her flight he would be able to signal her with a certain type of signal—blue rockets, yes!"

He nodded as he saw the interest of the chums.

"He would manage to lure the big airplane to some spot, drive it down and force it to land. Then I must take the passengers in charge and hold them. If I did not choose to agree, he said that he had ways of making sure that they disappeared—suddenly!"

"That is why you said you were capturing them to protect them," Rod declared. "It is curious how different things look, according to

how you look at the person who tells them. Now that we don't suspect you, everything seems logical."

"That is why so many innocent people suffer for the guilty acts of others," Wrenn agreed. "The police and others decide that they must be guilty, and whatever they say will be used against them!"

"That's so," Tim admitted. "So you agreed to hold the passengers," he prompted.

Wrenn acknowledged the truth of the guess.

"You know what happened during the following night," he went on. "At least Rodney does. He drove down the ship that tried to force the other to dive!"

"Yes," Rodney agreed, "but I'm glad I didn't send its pilot West, even if it was Joe."

"Ah!" remarked Wrenn, "now I have to explain something. When that airplane fell, its wings were blazing. A wing-tank must have leaked gas and helped to spread the flames. By the time it struck—there wasn't a spot the size of your hand that wasn't blazing. We couldn't get near enough to see who was in it—and no pilot survived that furnace!"

"But—" Rodney swung on Wrenn suspiciously, "I saw him, and he was burned and he was raving."

"That was Joe!"

"How could it be?" Tim argued. "Joe was in the liner!"

"My idea is that Joe slipped away from the liner and came to see me as soon as he landed," Wrenn explained. "He could have learned about the pass from the plateau to the gorge. When he heard that Rodney was caught he was afraid that Rodney would recognize him. He ordered me to keep quiet about it, got some acid I use in chemical work, burned his skin with it, and told the old cook to pretend he was 'going West!'"

"And to think we've let him get away again!" Tim muttered.

Pat turned on Wrenn, not convinced that the man claiming to be a secret service agent was wholly genuine.

"When we told you that you were our prisoner, in the air attack," Pat remarked, "you disappeared—and then the auto-gyro went up——"

"I did escape, yes!" Wrenn agreed. "I did not want to disclose my identity until I could find Joe and make him redeem his promise to tell me the identity of the smugglers' leader—the one," he turned to Rod, "the one I told you used 'contact' and 'coupe.'"

"But Mr. Hawkins uses those words," Rod said. "I know he wasn't the one who forced

down the liner, because he can't fly, with one arm gone!"

"I suppose a few of the old timers still use those expressions," the secret agent responded. "Anyway, I wanted to find Joe. He had gotten away without telling me what he promised to tell. So I used an old ruse to fix your attention on the cave mouth while I pushed around a pivoted rock door that led to the outer fissure, went through and searched for the silk cord always left hanging in case of emergency."

That cord, he explained, could be pulled to release a silk ladder fixed at the cliff edge to unroll and permit an agile man to climb.

"The ladder was already down," he added. "I ran up, pulled it away before Tim came around the slower way. By the time I got on top of the rocks, Joe was gone in the autogyro, with Rodney pursuing."

He surmised that when Rodney had flown away to mislead the occupant of the 'gyro, Joe had crouched low in the cockpit, waited until Rodney departed, then gone where he was headed for.

"At any rate," he finished, "I received a message by radio, later, to meet Joe at the large valley landing spot he had selected. I was to build a beacon fire and he would come in a 'plane, bringing the ringleader of the

American smugglers to deliver into my hands! He didn't!"

"There's Teddy!" cried Pat. "I wondered why he wasn't here to meet us."

Across the plateau from the direction of the pass, secret no longer, came their new friend.

"He's with somebody—limping man—can't be his father." Tim strained his eyes to see across the dark expanse of the plateau.

"I've got a prisoner!" cried Teddy, approaching.

As the short figure came into the light, Rod gasped a name.

"Henry!"

"Yes," the mechanician acknowledged the identification. "What a time I've had! Trying to help your pa, Rod! Missed the duplicate of the Queen, got me another ship from a man I know well, saw blue rockets and followed 'em! Discovered I was being lured down here by the man in the duplicate ship, tried to force it down—got in the way of somebody's rocket, my wing-tank caught fire, and I had to jump and yank the ripcord of my back-pack 'chute mighty quick! Came down on rock—guess I came close to dislocating my hip and laid in agony till to-night——"

"Can't believe you!" snapped Tim. "You

tried to force down the Oakland Queen, and you know it!"

"No such thing! I——"

"But you did!" Rod supported Tim's accusation, relieved that Henry, for all his seeming wickedness, had not lost his life through Rod's attempt to save the liner. "You were riding down the Oakland Queen!"

"It couldn't be—" Henry paused. "Do you mean to tell me I mistook the real liner and was trying to ride that down?"

"Mistook—nothing!" cried Pat.

"But I tell you I did! I followed a ship, lost it for awhile, and the next blue rocket I saw I followed—thought it was the same ship! I knew Joe must be in it, or Nelse, and I wanted to give the malefactor a dose of his own medicine in the place he had fixed to do it for the Billion Dollar pessengers."

His tone was sincere, his story had the ring of genuine truth.

"We'll soon know!" asserted Tim. "Teddy, how did you catch him?"

"He was coming down a ladder in the fissure, and I was looking out of the chimney-hole and saw him. I watched him. He spotted the hole, but I was hidden behind a box in the inside cave when he crawled through and lighted matches till he discovered the way through the pivoted

rock. Then he went on into the cave, and I followed. He searched that, went on into the gorge and around to the bigger cave—and found the old heap of discarded clothing. That's where I caught him—searching that!"

"What was he looking for?"

"This!" exclaimed Henry, "the paper Nelse ran off with!"

"Let us see it!" They crowded around and he surrendered the small document readily.

"'The man who flew the Ellis ship, that stripped its wings, disregarded storm warnings and landing signals, flew into a Kansas 'twister' and jumped clear, deserting his passengers,'" they read, "'his name was—Joe!'"

"Yes!" snapped Rodney, "but—you've erased—your own name—and put in the other! Lieutenant—arrest this man!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

"CONTACT AND COUPE"

"HERE comes Father!" cried Teddy, as the sound of an approaching airplane became audible.

"Hurry! Get the other ship off to the end of the runway. They'll want to land on it—it's the only safe part of the place!" cried Rod.

With the group of former captives, some soldiers and the Sky Scouts at wheels, braces and tail, the large ship was rushed away to the windward end of the small landing space available for large ships.

"Set approach green, white markers and red in front of this ship!" Rod hastened from the locker in the airplane whence he had taken the signal lights.

"But that's the Oakland Queen!" he declared as the large liner made her circle of the plateau. "It's the Oakland Queen—I recognize the sweep-back and angle of the wings, and the odd shape of the fins and flippers!"

Presently, as the large aircraft made its landing, his assertion was proved true.

From the liner emerged Mr. Ellis, Leonard Stedman—and Joe!

"I thought you said in your message over the air that Joe had deserted!" exclaimed Rodney as soon as he hurried salutations and swift explanations had been exchanged. Hawkins, joining them at San Diego, was also a listener.

"I begin to believe that every radio call we have caught has been deliberately sent out to mislead and confuse us!" his father declared. "We sent no call of distress, on the occasion when Henry mistook us for the duplicate—" he was determined to accept Henry's explanation, in spite of the erasure and substitution of Joe's name in the message Henry had found, "we went to Mexico City to verify Nelse's call and meet him. The substitute ship was not there!"

"We flew on to San Diego," Mr. Stedman explained. "We knew that a large Wall Street 'wire' house, or brokerage firm dealing in stock sales by wire, had a branch there. Sure enough, as if we needed any more information, we got it. *Henry* is innocent of anything but a desire to frustrate *Nelse's* plans. So is Joe."

"So were you!" agreed Ellis. "We discovered that Nelse, under the name of Joseph, here, but not fitting Joe's description, had been making arrangements to have huge amounts of stock sold 'short' for him, on the wired signal 'con-

tact and coupe!' He hoped to cause the sale of stocks, at prices fairly high, to work in with the newspaper scareheads that would tell of a distress call from the liner, and the loss of the Billion Dollar crowd. Then, when these scares forced timid people to sell their stocks, the prices would be very low, and his brokers could repurchase, and make a handsome profit for him."

"And all the time, thinking it was Joe, we had the real ringleader of the Wall Street crowd in the compartment of that ship!" Tim exclaimed disgustedly. "He's probably somewhere near a telephone, sending his call, 'contact and coupe!' "

"And those words are the very ones that he said were used by the head of the smuggling crowd!" asserted Wrenn, dejectedly. "Oh, boys! How you have botched up the whole thing."

"Come on!" called Rodney, rushing toward the newly arrived liner, "let's get this out of the way, and take off in the duplicate. I let the engines rev along at idling speed. She's all warmed up and needs only a shot of the gun to clear the cylinders, while the Queen would have to be started and time wasted."

"What do you want to do?" demanded his father.

"To fly after Nelse. Dad, you can take off in

the Queen, then Pat will go along, get fuel in the Jenny—you can set down where we left it—while Tim and Ted get the Express fueled and aloft. Mr. Stedman and Joe can warm up the Queen. Between the four ships, we're bound to sight him, whether he's hiding on the ground or up in the auto-gyro!"

With a rush and a cheer the group raced to get the Queen out of the way.

Then came a stunning surprise.

From the door of the duplicate ship's cabin came a shout of exultant triumph.

Nelse stood there.

"Thanks for clearing the way!" he yelled as they stared, stupefied for an instant. "I cut through the wall, but I didn't get out. I let you think the hole kicked in the body had let me escape; but I wanted to stay around until I could get a chance to fly this nice ship to Honduras. You can't extradite me, there, and I can enjoy the fruits of the revenge I am getting on the Billion Dollar crowd for the way they made Wall Street crash three years ago—ruining me and a lot of poor widows and orphans. Yes—I placed orders for stock to be sold 'short' and put in my order for buying back at a lot lower price. I sent out all the distress stuff—but some other 'op' garbled it, so I decided to wait till the coast was clear and

then hop for Honduras, and send my call on the way."

He surprised them so much that the entire assembly was still staring and inactive, around the Queen. They knew that a move toward him would send him to the controls. Revved up, the engines would sweep his ship upon them. They were helpless. They had to listen.

"I flew the Ellis ship past storm signals, got into a twister, and deserted, wearing a 'chute-pack I always had in those days. Yes—the wings stripped through my fault, if it does any good to know it! I'll do that much for Ellis—he helped my plan by suspecting Stedman and fixing up this duplicate ship as I suggested, so I could use its radio!

"Yes, Wrenn," he shouted, "you helped me, too! I'll tell you that after the Wall Street 'bears' ruined me, and I had to go back to my old, war-time job, flying, against the odds of being sky-shy, I took up with these Mex. bandits, and ran the smuggling from the American side and used you to hold these millionaires. I got Joe to suspect Henry, Hank to suspect Joe, Ellis to distract Stedman—and all that!"

He had contrived to scheme about the duplicate ship for which Ellis had so easily furnished the model of the old, wing-stripped craft.

He had contrived the meeting at field eleven, but had preceded Henry and secured the ship which he had flown down to a landing in Mexico, from which he could reach the gorge, and yet return to send out his radio messages.

"Flying down, I saw the Queen, lured her down with my blue signals. But Henry had another ship, and followed me. I lost him and when I saw he thought he was chasing me, and was really chasing the Queen, I flew off and let him do my driving down for me."

He laughed exultantly.

Very quietly Rodney touched Tim's arm. They sidled around into the shadows of the liner, made their way behind the other craft, hesitated whether to try to creep up behind Nelse or to try to get to the Express and start its engine. They decided on the latter course. Still hearing Nelse, they began dragging the extra fuel cans out of the body.

"I came to tell Wrenn to grab the Billion Dollar bunch!" exulted Nelse. "Rod came, I fooled him, as Joe, got away from Wrenn—sent out misleading calls on this ship's radio—oh! I've got everything ready! Now—all I have to do is sell short and——"

"The brokers will suffer as you will!" snapped Stedman. "These men here are not the real millionaires, either. They are 'dupli-

cates!' The Billion Dollar crowd is at its desks, ready to snow you under with buying orders that will send stocks kiting upward!"

"That can't be so!——"

"I guessed that," Rod whispered as Tim took out the last tin of excess fuel. "Father didn't fly the king-pin from our place, as he had intended. I guessed that if he didn't join the Oakland Queen, neither would the others!"

"It's very true!" Ellis assured Nelse. "So you might as well give up, for we'll extradite you on the charge of abandoning your ship and destroying all those precious lives——"

"No you won't!" Nelse disappeared from view.

"Put chocks under those wheels—quick!" shouted Joe. "Hold him!"

There came the roar of gunned engines.

"Switch off—gas on!" yelled Tim at the Express high-wing's nose.

"Switch off—gas on!" repeated Rodney, swiftly.

"Contact!"

"Contact!—hooray!"

The small engine whirred, roared into life.

Down the field, rapidly rising went the big duplicate liner.

Almost on its tail fled the lighter, more agile Express.

"Come!" shouted Stedman. "Joe—Ellis—get to the props—we must get the Queen in the air!"

Flying after the duplicate liner, Rodney scribbled a note on a slip of paper, passing it back to Tim.

"When I left the ship we arrived on," he had written, "I noticed the fuel was lower than was safe, so I let the engines rev on. She can't go fifty miles—and we can!"

But the ship did not mean to go far. Nelse worked straight for the plateau where he had been caught. Perhaps he had the auto-gyro concealed there, Rod thought. But try as he would he could not make his Express catch up, quite, to the swift duplicate liner. Nelse was a skilful pilot. He flew the ship at its peak of speed.

"We'll get him when he lands!" exulted Rodney.

The larger ship cut its power, shot the plateau without caring for light or direction, bumped down. But Rodney, knowing that he had Tim to think about, lost valuable seconds.

Before he could make the correct estimate of a safe spot that would not rush him into the other ships, he heard the sound of the Jenny's engine. The old Liberty was alive again!

Straightaway the Jenny rose. Rodney, circling to get the wind on the nose of the Ex-

press, saw that he must zoom, and quickly, or be rammed.

He gave it the gun, roaring upward and to safety.

Then, on wingtip, he came around, and began to climb to get on the tail of the Jenny.

But the crazy ship, at last, acted its part. It's cold Liberty, with the weak battery, sputtered, hesitated. Nelse threw on full gun, and again the Liberty took up its beat. He began to climb it, at a dreadfully steep angle, to get above the other ship. Rod, seeing his gas needle flicker, knew that his Express had a clogged gas line or some other trouble. He gave up. But Nelse went aloft—and then, saving Rodney the pain of harm to a fellow being, the Crazy Jenny stalled, slapped her nose down, the cranky Liberty caught—went down on a rock in a power dive.

They found only wreakage—a washout, and, for Nelse, "coupe."

"Well, Dad gets the auto-gyro in exchange, anyway," remarked Teddy as dawn broke. "And everybody's cleared—and Henry says the compass was unintentionally deflected because in putting his secret set behind the gas tanks of the Queen, its iron-core audio transformers would magnetize the needle, pull it aside, every time that set was switched in."

"So ends the mystery of the deflected compass!" agreed Rod. "It will seem tame to go back to testing, and designing, rigging and straight flying—after all our avigation——"

"Wait!" interrupted Tim, "there's another thing that has come out of the mystery of the vanishing air liner! I mean never to argue with Pat again—let him have his right to an opinion same as I have!"

"What?" cried Ted, "have you stopped telling the baby elephant his brains are in his bread-basket—for good?"

"They aren't there—" Tim retorted.

"Oh, yes, they are!" Pat grunted, sleepily. Still there. But—I haven't eaten—for so long—hunger sharpened—my wits—I—guess."

And with his fifth tamale half eaten, he was in dreamland.

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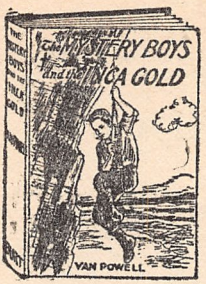

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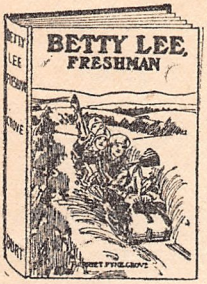

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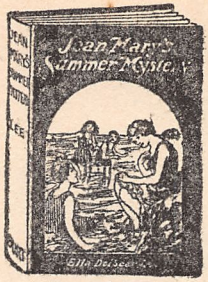

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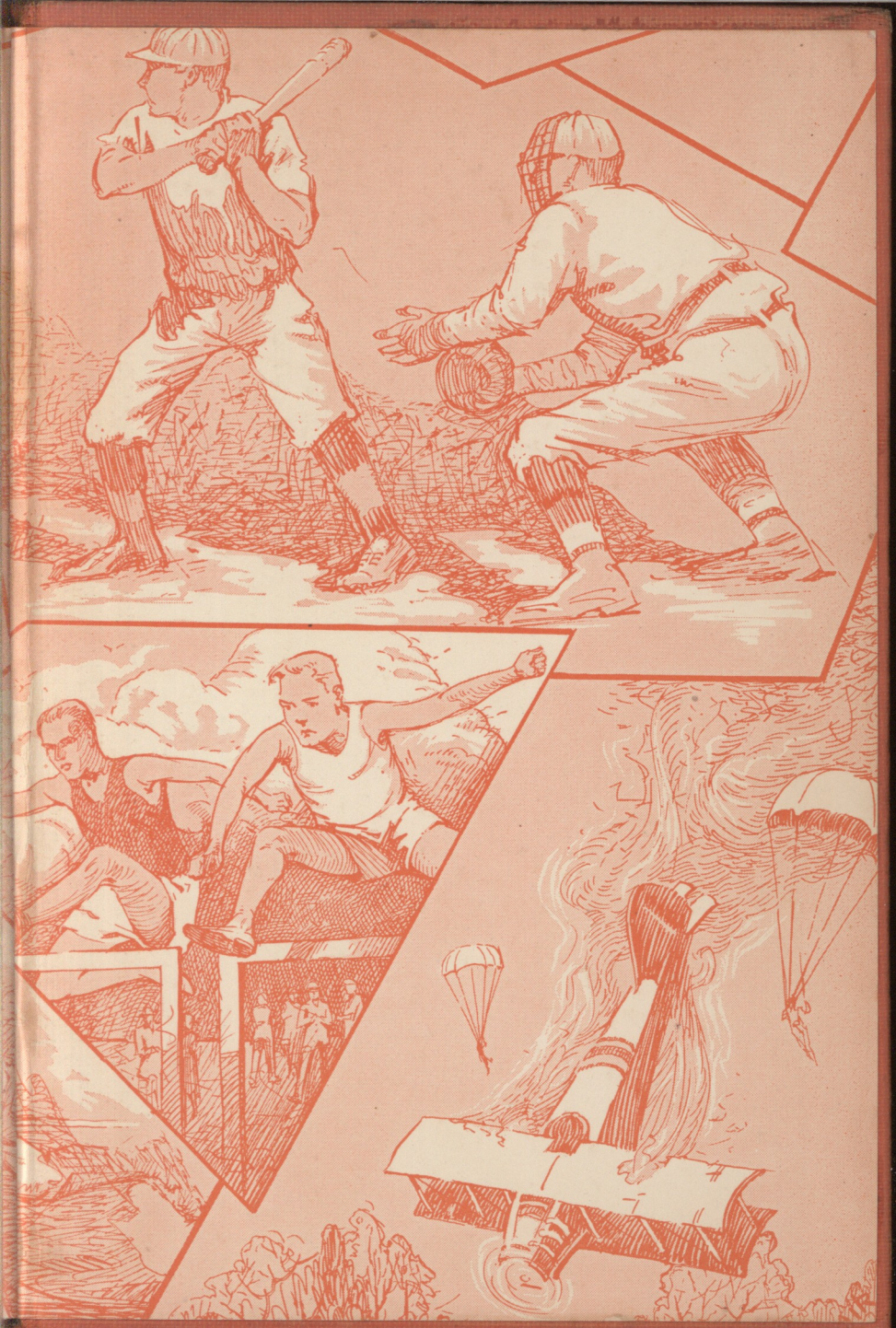

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